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ABSTRACT

As much as any society of people, Australians represent themselves as equals. Yet few Australians are able to fit the widely circulated myths about what is normal, valuable, and desirable in their society. This book enables teachers and their students to challenge the multiplicity of texts that combine to tell Australians who they are and who they should be, and to construct new, truly inclusive, texts in their place. The book concerns itself with three things: differences among people, and the responses to them; the cultural context, and the messages that it circulates about these differences; and education, and the contribution that teachers and schools make to the way students learn to think about the diversity of the society they are part of. The book is divided into the following chapters: Introduction: Educating Raoul and Rifka and Rita: Difference, Cultural Context and the Challenges of Education; (1) Interesting Times: Contemporary Contexts and Traditions in Difference and Schooling; (2) Making a Difference to Differences: The Key Principles of a Transformative Approach; (3) What Happens Next? Doing Transformative Analysis; (4) Pitfalls, Perils and Possibilities: Maximizing Transformative Potential; (5) Transformative Tracks: New Ways of Dealing with Difference; (6) Towards Transformative Classrooms; (7) Traditional Days in Different Ways: Creating Transformative Classroom Texts; and Conclusion: Transformative Analysis and Counternarratives: Other Days, Other Ways. Contains a glossary. (NKA)

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*for Christo*

*and all the kids*

Leonie Rowan

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inclusive texts in the primary classroom

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# Introduction

## Educating Raoul and Rifka and Rita: Difference, cultural context and the challenges of education

In 1987, so the story goes, Pepsi-Cola — that enormously successful international corporation — decided to launch its 'world-famous' soft drink in a range of new and untapped markets. One of these markets was Thailand, and the powers-that-be decided that they would begin the process of educating the Thai people about their 'need' for Pepsi's products with the same slogan used successfully in the United States: 'Come alive, you're in the Pepsi generation'. Unfortunately, however, something was definitely lost in the translation. Pepsi was launched on the unsuspecting Thai population with the rather novel catch-cry: 'Pepsi brings your ancestors back from the dead' (Hoffman, 1988:927).

Quite apart from the fact that I find this story to be very funny, it has stuck in my mind because it illustrates what I see as an absolutely vital point for those of us who work in education: no matter how experienced we are, no matter how successful we might be, successful communication depends upon our ability to recognise and respond to the characteristics of our audience.

It might be tempting for us to assume that the way we communicate to — or seek to teach — one group of people will work just as well with another, entirely different group. However, recognising and responding to social and cultural difference is vital if

meaningful, successful and positive communication is to take place. In our work as educators, we are therefore continually challenged to recognise the cultural context within which we are located, and to respond to the differences that are a fundamental part of this culture. It is with this combination of education, cultural context and difference that this book is fundamentally concerned.

# This book

Let me explore this in more detail. This book concerns itself with three things:

- *differences* among people, and the ways in which we respond to them
- our *cultural context*, and the messages that it circulates about these differences
- *education*, and the contribution that teachers and schools make to the way students learn to think about the diversity of the society they are part of.

Each one of these topics is complex, and can generate significant debate. People may well agree, for example, that we are living in a world characterised by significant cultural differences (languages, nationalities, religions and so on), but there is often a great deal of disagreement about how and why people located in particular places — such as Australian schools — can or should respond to these differences. It's clear that many advances have been made in regard to social acceptance of differences relating to race, gender and religion, for example. On the other hand, even a cursory glance at the news reveals ongoing instances of sex-based harassment, racial vilification and religious persecution. And if you want to test out how accepting our culture has become, try mentioning the issue of gender rights at an average Australian barbecue: if you're lucky, you'll end up with a mild disagreement; if you're like me, you'll end up in the middle of the potato salad!

In the broad cultural context of Australia, therefore, it is always possible to detect beliefs (and a whole set of corresponding practices) that relate to our sense of cultural identity. This is fundamentally tied up to beliefs about the 'real', the 'normal' and the 'natural' Australian, with each one of these constructs being regularly defined in very narrow ways. Later in this book, I will talk further about the ways in which the idea of the normal Australian is circulated. Here, though, the point I want to make is this: we are faced with ever-increasing examples of difference in Australian society, and the role of teachers in providing positive and productive ways of understanding and responding to this diversity has never been more important.

It is therefore vital that educators are provided with the kind of support necessary to prepare them for their role in helping individuals to respond to diversity in positive and inclusive ways. In other words, I believe that it is important for us to acknowledge that schools and all other educational settings play a vital role in determining how individuals and groups will react to various markers of difference. As educators, it is not our role to ensure that we reproduce society as it is. Rather, one of our key

responsibilities is to work consciously and creatively to provide spaces for individuals to embrace principles of justice, tolerance and inclusion. If you need any further rationale for taking up that responsibility, you need only turn to statements about the goals of schooling that are regularly disseminated by system authorities, or to the content of curriculum documents themselves.

To support this responsibility, the first step I will take is to explore the ways in which the three key terms, difference, culture and education, will be used throughout this book. Let's start with the issue of difference.

## Difference

> *Difference: the physical, behavioural and social dissimilarities between individuals.*

It is now relatively common for us to acknowledge that there is a great deal of diversity in our society. Much of this diversity is easy to identify: think of all the ways in which a group of people, all living in Auckland, New Zealand, for example, could be different. Without too much effort here, you would probably identify such variables as age, race, gender, employment, religion, physical appearance, financial status. Pushed a little harder, you might think about differences relating to sexuality, physical ability and intellectual ability.

But I'm not just interested in learning to identify and list differences. Instead, what I am really interested in are the ways in which our community, in its broadest sense, teaches us to react and respond to these differences. I'm interested in the way we *value* or *devalue* various differences. And I'm interested in the consequences of this. Let's just think about one of those categories of difference named above — physical appearance. Close your eyes and think about some of the different body types that we know exist in our world. Do you think we value each body type in exactly the same way? Think about the ways in which people react to those various body types: which ones are most commonly admired? Which ones would people most like to change? Which would you like to have? Which ones do we see most of in 'glamorous' sites like TV or the movies? Which ones are we taught to love? Which ones are we taught to dislike? Which ones do we strive to change? And how similar do you think our various answers might be?

# Cultural context

> *Cultural context: the social environment within which an individual is positioned. This relates both to national identity — I live in Australia — and to more particular aspects of the social environment such as membership of a family, a church group, a social club and so on. To be part of a culture implies (among many other things) an awareness of the physical characteristics, behaviours and practices that are valued in that context, and those that are devalued.*

Regardless of the environment you have grown up in, you will have been able to identify the fact that people often have quite different reactions to different kinds of human bodies. In many cases, these different reactions reflect a kind of hierarchy of values. In Australia, where I live, it appears to me that young, thin, physically able, white-skinned, healthy-looking bodies are valued most highly, and that other bodies (like mine!) are tolerated but certainly not celebrated.

Indeed, a seemingly endless array of gorgeous people talk to us from the TV, from magazine stands, from shopping centres and so on, offering hints on how to look thinner, younger, sexier, healthier and generally more 'attractive'. These people are positioned as mediators of the culture, able to tell us what is valuable and desirable at any given point.

Whole industries revolve around beauty and the pursuit of a particular physical ideal: the more we depart from this *mythical norm* (a term I will return to shortly), the worse off we are in terms of receiving endorsement within our cultural context.

What I am emphasising here is that differences — such as differences in our body types, or our skin colours, or our age — don't just exist in a neutral, harmonious world. Rather, they exist in a world that attaches *meanings* to these differences — a world that either values or devalues specific physical characteristics and particular behaviours performed by particular bodies. In other words, our cultural context helps to determine those differences we regard as good, and those we regard as undesirable.

I'd like to discuss this point a little more. Think once again about the differences that characterise your-community. Draw yourself up eight big circles and give each one a heading, as in Fig. P.1 opposite.

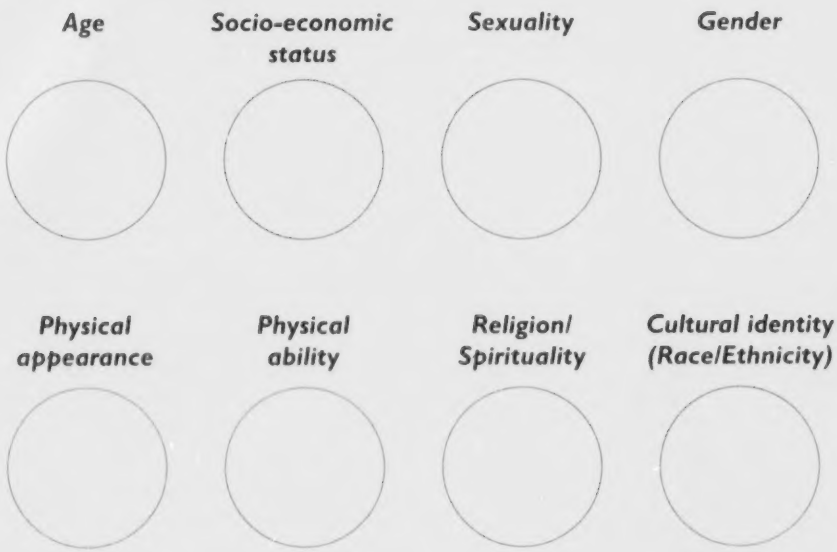


*Figure P.1: Eight paradigms of difference*

Now, into each of these circles, add a list of variables that relate to the heading. For socio-economic status, for example, you might come up with:

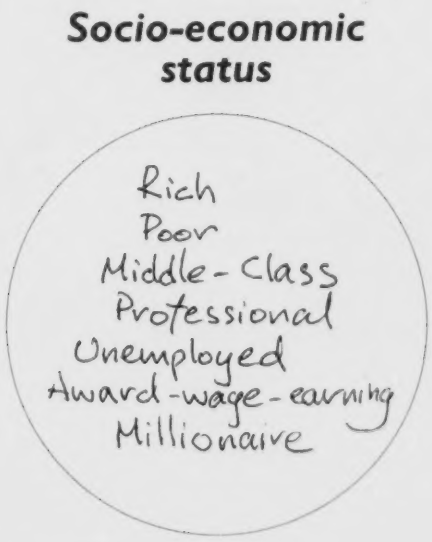


*Figure P.2: Sample variables within a paradigm of difference*

You don't need to have an exhaustive listing, just an indication of some of the variety within each of these categories, or *paradigms*, of difference. Don't worry too much about the specific terms you use to describe the differences; yours will differ from mine.

When we think about each of these paradigms, it quickly becomes clear that there are many possible variables within each one (with the exception of the paradigm relating to gender, which, for the most part, includes only two variables — male and female). Age, for instance, covers every age group from birth through to significant old age. Cultural identity relates to every category used by people to define their sense of their own background. In some instances, people prefer to use the terms race or ethnicity to describe this sense. This category includes, for instance, everything from the broad and fairly general term 'Australian' (with which many people may identify) through to other more specific and generally more carefully defined terms such as Indigenous Australian, migrant Australian, first-generation Australian, Lebanese Australian and so on. It is probably important to note here that when I use the term 'cultural identity', I am doing so in order to signal the categories with which people align *themselves*, rather than some of the general and fairly disparaging categories that may be used by others to describe those same people.

Clearly, some of these paradigms are very big, and it would take a long time to fill them out completely. As you become familiar with working with them, you might find that it is important to extend the range of the variables. Variables relating to sexuality, for example, might extend beyond those relating to sexual orientation to include ideas of fertility, monogamy or level of sexual activity. You might also find it useful or necessary to 'drill down' into subcategories. As a variable relating to physical ability, for example, 'able-bodied' might lead to such further distinctions as 'elite athlete', 'regular walker', 'inactive', 'frequent smoker/drinker' etc.

And there are many other paradigms of difference that could be explored. Our geographical location, for instance, would highlight differences between people living in urban, suburban and rural areas. Analysis of interests or hobbies would reveal a huge paradigm. There are many other areas we could explore. I have chosen to focus this book on the eight paradigms represented above, however, because they are particularly powerful in shaping how an individual is *positioned* and *treated* within both the broad cultural context provided by Australia, and in more specific cultural products — such as schools, books, movies — circulated within that environment.

The point I'd like to make here is that these paradigms (and all the differences within them) don't just exist, they are also interpreted and made sense of on a daily basis within our cultural context. For example, think about which variables from each paradigm we see and hear most about. Which ones do we see most on TV? Which ones do we see most in our movies and picture books? Which ones are we most likely to encounter in history books, in art books, in religious stories? Which are portrayed positively? Which are portrayed negatively?

Perhaps most interestingly of all, ask yourself which combinations we are invited to admire the most: for example, are we given opportunities to admire a post-menopausal, Indonesian-Australian, Muslim woman as greatly as a fertile, Anglo-Australian, Christian man? How often do we see poor, sexually inactive men who are primary caregivers for children? Wealthy married businesswomen who travel the world independently?

## Culture, difference and the mythical norm

This brings me to the crux of this book. In the world that I am part of, and the Australian cultural context that I spend most of my life in, there are very specific images that are repeated over and over. More often than not, I will see images of white, thin, financially secure, able-bodied, physically attractive people in the cultural texts that entertain and educate me. I see these images and know that they are valued. I see these images and know that there are other images that could be used. I see these images and know that these alternatives — these differences — are not as valued as this imagined norm. In other words, we are living in a world that is significantly different, in reality, to the mythical norm that circulates about what that world — and the people within it — is like. Audre Lorde (1988:282) expresses this well when she writes:

> *Somewhere, on the edge of consciousness, there is what I call a mythical norm, which each one of us within our hearts knows 'that is not me' ... this norm is usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian and financially secure.*

What Lorde highlights here is the existence of powerful images about what constitutes normal and desirable behaviours and characteristics, and the impact that these images have on people who understand that they do not 'fit' this mythical norm. Think about it for a second: is there anything about yourself that you would like to be able to change? Do you believe there is anything about yourself that, if it were changed, would earn respect or some kind of approval from people around you? Are there qualities you think your friends, or strangers, would admire more than they might admire things about you now?

These are tough questions, but many of us carry around (or have had to work through) at least some feeling of inadequacy — some sense of discomfort brought about by our knowledge that we don't quite match up to the image of an ideal man or woman. The point that I will explore throughout this book is that we learn to react to various markers of difference because of the cultural context we live in and the cultural texts — cultural communication — we are exposed to.

Learning to identify how norms are constructed and circulated requires deliberate effort. In most cases, the patterns of communication associated with these norms have been rendered almost invisible by years of repetition. In addition, many of the more unpleasant consequences of these norms are also obscured by popular-cultural myths about the 'nature' of Australia.

To give a very brief example, a lot of effort goes in to representing Australia as the land of 'mateship' and the 'fair go'. This kind of image is perpetuated in songs and poetry as well as advertising, TV programs and popular rhetoric. But if we look beyond the smokescreen generated by this myth, we see that the notion of mateship is often very exclusive, and that not everyone is seen as entitled to the same kind of fair go as everyone else. This does not mean that mateship isn't a real or valued or valuable dimension of many Australians' self-identity, but it does mean that if we are starting to ask tough questions about just who does get included or valued or treated

like a mate, then we first have to get past the powerful protective cloak that surrounds the very idea in the first place. This requires considerable skills in both cultural analysis and diplomacy, for the object of this book will be defeated if people feel their most precious values to be coming under attack for no good reason.

What we need, then, are spaces where people can learn to ask better questions about the world around them, so that they develop a more complete understanding of how it responds to them, to others and to various ideas. This leads to the role that education and teachers play in either constructing or contesting various mythical norms.

## Education

If we acknowledge that our cultural context helps to teach us how to respond to issues of difference, it isn't too long before we start thinking about the roles that our education system plays in this process. As one of the key institutions in many societies, schooling plays a very big role in shaping the attitudes with which we approach the world and the people within in it. This means that schools — just like other elements of our culture such as families, sporting groups, the media and so on — give us messages about good or desirable behaviour, and good or desirable characteristics.

This means, in turn, that teachers can have a positive impact upon the ways in which kids, parents and society in the broadest sense deal with the differences among us. Indeed, while they are also under pressure to ensure that their students learn to read, write and act like good citizens, our teachers are expected to set 'positive examples'. Over recent years, the definition of what counts as a positive example has been broadened to relate specifically to tolerance towards those who are both similar to, and different from, us. Unfortunately, many teachers have been given little or no preparation for this vital role. For this reason, the issues can appear too large, and the risks of speaking out against discrimination or prejudice can seem too great. This is exacerbated by the ways in which teachers are constantly expected to respond to 'new' school and government priorities, often with little professional development (I'm sure you can think of a time when this has happened to you!).

It's for this reason that I really want to emphasise the fact that this book takes seriously the pressures put on teachers by institutional polices and their own sense of equity, justice or fair play, and it recognises that dealing with difference in constructive and productive ways requires particular skills that need to be learnt. Dealing positively with difference isn't just about being a good or a nice person. The nicest person in the world can flounder in the face of entrenched racial prejudice or long-standing and restrictive gender norms. In order to deal effectively with difference in their classrooms and schools, teachers need an understanding of the ways in which attitudes towards difference are developed, how they are sustained, and how they can be effectively challenged.

# The structure of the book

This book responds to the challenge facing teachers who deal with difference, and attitudes to difference, in their everyday lives. It will explore the ways in which mythical norms relating to the eight paradigms of difference (identified earlier) are constructed, and the equally significant ways in which alternatives to these narrow, stereotypical images are created and introduced to our culture. We will investigate the ways in which we learn to value some characteristics, particularly physical characteristics such as thinness, white skin and able bodies, and cultural characteristics such as Christianity or wealth, and also reflect upon the ways in which we simultaneously learn to devalue — even if not consciously — things that are often seen as 'different', such as black skin, physical disability or poverty. And we will explore the role that teachers can play in either perpetuating or challenging mythical norms.

We will be exploring, in short, the various ways in which differences can be addressed. This involves examining both positive and negative portrayals of difference, and highlighting those educational practices which can work to acknowledge, include, value and, ultimately, celebrate difference.

Because schools are fundamentally tied to the cultural context they are part of, getting to a point where differences can be included, valued and celebrated is a very deliberate and skilful business. To get there, educators require the skills that allow them to:

- identify the existence of differences within various contexts
- recognise patterns in the ways with which these differences are commonly dealt
- highlight the ways in which our own educational environment responds to those patterns, by analysing all the component parts — all the texts — that make up this environment
- recognise the consequences of narrow, exclusive representations of difference
- imagine and develop new, inclusive images of difference.

Each of these skills relates to the broad set of expertise that I will refer to in this book as *transformative textual analysis*. Within a transformative textual analysis framework, we learn to read a whole range of texts — story books, histories, conversations, magazines, advertisements, cereal boxes, videos, music lyrics, football games and many, many more — in ways which allow us to identify not just the technical construction of the text (how it has been put together and why it was put together this way), but rather the *ideological* dimension of the text (the consequences of the text; the meanings/things/people it values and/or devalues). In developing skills of textual analysis, we will learn to identify the choices that are made when texts are constructed — the ways in which we select some things to include in texts and some others to exclude.

In the later chapters of the book, I will expand on these skills of textual analysis to think through the role that teachers can play in the production of alternative stories and perspectives on difference. These are skills of *textual production*: skills associated with making texts — classroom posters, lesson plans, resources and so on — that deal with difference in positive and transformative ways. Some possibilities for responding to difference in the classroom will be illustrated by a series of rich descriptions of classroom activities that have been designed and implemented by educators.

The aim throughout is to emphasise the importance of being able to identify the traditional stories — or traditional *narratives* — about difference that circulate in our culture (and our classrooms), and the consequences of these traditions. A concurrent aim is to identify ways in which alternative stories — *counternarratives* — can transform the manner in which individuals and groups think about and respond to diversity. Throughout the various chapters I will refer to a wide range of texts and genres to illustrate key points. Where possible, I have tried to work with texts that are relatively well known. Many other texts could have been used to support most of these points; hopefully you will be able to think of some that are part of your own resource set already.

Because dealing with difference is an undeniably challenging task (and one about which different people hold very different opinions), in the next chapter I will provide a starting point — a brief overview of the various ways in which people and educators have traditionally responded to the issue of difference.

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# Chapter One

## Interesting times:

## Contemporary contexts and traditions in difference and schooling

Since 1998, debates around boys and schools have really intensified in Australian contexts. It's on TV, it's in the papers, politicians make speeches about it, and concerned teachers and parents are attending meetings and conferences focused on this topic. The sense of crisis associated with the issue has given rise to a flood of suggestions concerning the best ways in which teachers, schools, parents and the community should respond.

At various forums I've attended, a range of suggestions have been put forward to 'solve' this problem: moving boys into single-sex classes for English lessons; recruiting football stars to sponsor reading-in-school programs; encouraging boys to read 'masculine' texts such as sporting magazines; ensuring that all boys are given time to focus on reading in school contexts; encouraging critical-reading skills in the boys ... and so on. Many of these suggestions have been backed up with claims about the different ways in which boys' brains work, the role that testosterone plays in making them 'naturally' aggressive, and the importance of boys being taught by male teachers who can 'understand' them. In one particularly interesting discussion around this topic, a prominent politician told me that men shouldn't be given slices of lemon in

their glasses of water, because that's the kind of 'girly' behaviour which results in poor literacy skills!

After an hour or so of these kinds of discussions, I generally have a splitting headache and a desire to be alone in a very dark room for a very long time. The problem isn't that people don't care deeply about the issue. The problem is that many people put forward potential solutions without fully understanding the nature of the problem, or bring very different perspectives as to how the problem may be best understood. In order to pose any solution to any educational challenge, however, we need to ensure first that we have a shared understanding of the problem. This takes us straight back to the issue of difference, and the need for us to have a very well-developed understanding about how attitudes towards difference are developed, and how they are best able to be challenged.

In this chapter, I am going to provide a brief overview of the major ways in which educators have tended to respond to the challenges posed by cultural difference. I will review the strengths and weaknesses of each approach, then conclude by outlining a contemporary model for thinking about, and responding positively to, the differences among us.

## Universal recognition of difference

On 20 November 1959, the General Assembly of the United Nations released the Declaration of the Rights of the Child. This declaration contained clear statements on the rights of all children to live safely and happily in a world that offered them full protection and personal freedom. Among other things, the Declaration states that:-

*Every child, without any exception whatsoever, shall be entitled to these rights, without distinction or discrimination on account of race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, or social origin, property, birth or other status ...*

This declaration called upon "parents, upon men and women as individuals, and upon voluntary organizations, local authorities and national Governments to recognize these rights and strive for their observance".

It wasn't until the 1960s — when the civil-rights movement drew attention to issues of racial and gender equality — that countries throughout the world began to develop legislation designed to protect the rights of all people regardless of their age, race, gender, ethnicity or physical ability.

In Australia, several important pieces of anti-discrimination legislation have been passed since the late sixties, including the 1969/1972 *Equal Pay for Equal Work Act*, the 1975 *Racial Discrimination Act*, the 1984 *Sex Discrimination Act* and the 1992 *Disability Discrimination Act*.

## Recognition of difference in Australian education policy

Over the past 25 years, we have seen a plethora of polices focused on things such as multicultural education, gender-inclusive education, education for disabled students, and anti-racism programs. Government documents and school mission statements alike abound with claims regarding the rights of individuals to a safe learning environment. 'Social justice' and 'equity' have become catch-cries.

To give two brief examples, Education Queensland (*Department of Education Manual*, EQ website, 2001) claims that it "has a role and responsibility to contribute to a socially just society by promoting equitable and fair access to, participation in, and outcomes from, the education provided ...".

The NSW Department of Education and Training (*Draft Anti-discrimination Policy*, DET website, 2001) has proposed that "all educators have a responsibility to:

- develop and use curriculum training and development materials that are non-discriminatory ...
- advocate for a just society by providing opportunities for all learners and staff to develop an understanding of the diversity of the Australian community."

# A challenging environment

Policy statements and political positions such as those given above provide educators with some very real challenges. On the one hand, they can be read as evidence that 'the problem' has been addressed and that there is no need for individual schools or teachers to address issues of gender, race or economic status actively. On the other hand, they can generate a sense of 'big brother watching', forcing people to act as though they wished to pursue equity goals.

Both situations can result in displays of what I will call 'stunt equity': flashy-looking, surface-level performances of inclusive practice that may well draw applause but do not stand up to close scrutiny. Examples of stunt equity programs include glibly-worded mission statements that aren't backed up with practices, or special programs that aren't connected to school-wide reform, or policies with no implementation guidelines. All of these things can look good but, ultimately, have little positive impact. If you think about it for a minute, I'm sure you'll be able to think of a stunt equity program in a school near you.

# Educational traditions in addressing difference

In order to move away from these kinds of fancy (and often well-meaning) but ultimately unproductive practices, it is necessary to have a very clear understanding of what our options are when it comes to responding to issues of difference in the classroom. I will therefore outline four main traditions in the history of equity and education (see Fig. 1.1). Each has something to say about the extent to which a group of students can be regarded as homogeneous (alike) or heterogeneous (different). I will also discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each approach. As you read through these descriptions, it would be helpful for you to try and think of an example of an educational reform that you believe illustrates the kind of approach I am discussing.

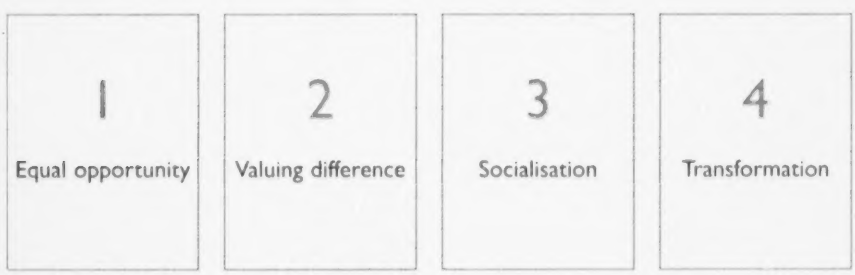


*Figure 1.1: Four traditions of equity in education*

I will start with perhaps the most common approach to difference: the equal-opportunity model.

## Model 1: Equal opportunity

The equal-opportunity approach to difference is based on the two key beliefs that:

- differences exist among people

- despite these differences, people are fundamentally the same, and are entitled to the same rights and responsibilities.

This approach seeks to eliminate the social barriers that prevent people from exercising the same rights as others. One of the broad principles that underpins equal-opportunity approaches to educational reform is that if opportunities are made available, and an individual is 'good enough', then they will be able to make the most of these opportunities. In other words, there is a strong emphasis on the responsibility of the individual to achieve her/his own goals. The equal-opportunity (or liberal) approach to reform has been popular throughout the last century, with reformists working to ensure that all individuals have access to the same opportunities.

The strength of the equal-opportunity approach is that it recognises that institutional barriers to an individual's participation in their society need to be removed. This kind of approach has seen achievements such as votes for working-class men, votes for women, votes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people, the abolition of segregated facilities (such as 'white people only' hotels or clubs) and the introduction of access facilities for people with disabilities.

To take the 'boys and literacy' issue referred to at the start of this chapter: the equal-opportunity approach would seek to ensure that boys had access to opportunities to study English. It would ensure that there were no timetable clashes, for example, that made it difficult for boys to access particular classes. It would ensure that boys had access to the same resources as girls. It would ensure that teachers gave time to the boys. And then it would be up to the boys to succeed within this framework.

The fact that the equal-opportunity model has pretty much dominated approaches to boys and English suggests that there are some limitations to this model. The key limitation is that it assumes that access to resources is the central issue. 'Opportunity', though, is not value-free. What kind of opportunity are we talking about? We must recognise that it is hard to succeed when your learning environment is not congruent with your values, learning style, capabilities and a range of factors that form your sense of identity. It is hard to be 'good enough' if your classroom context reminds you that you are 'not normal'. Consider a woman entering an engineering faculty. The equal-opportunity model would celebrate the importance of women being allowed entry to the faculty, but would not pay close attention to the other factors that might impact upon her success, such as the attitude of her classmates, a hostile study environment, negative reactions from lecturers, limited peer-support networks, bad work experiences and so on. In other words, an equal-opportunity model can very easily set individuals up for failure.

The equal-opportunity model, therefore, provides valuable guidance in terms of encouraging us to examine the existence of structural barriers to the inclusion of people from different backgrounds in educational contexts. It does not necessarily attend to the wider systems of beliefs that influence these structures. Indeed, it leaves the structures themselves relatively unchallenged, arguing only for particular groups to be 'added in' to the existing systems.

## Model 2: Valuing difference

Whereas the equal-opportunity perspective tends to focus on treating people 'the same', many equity advocates have argued that diverse experiences, perspectives and attitudes need to be accommodated within educational systems. This is an argument for acknowledging and valuing difference.

The principles underpinning this model are that:

- differences exist between people
- these differences are apparent in the perspectives and capabilities of individuals
- these differences should be acknowledged and valued.

At one level, an emphasis on difference is clearly a good thing. This model of reform has seen attention paid, for example, to the contributions made by indigenous people in fields such as art and music; it has seen recognition of the diverse roles played by women during key historical moments such as world wars; and it has seen the perspectives of women, indigenous peoples, diverse cultures and diverse religions incorporated within school curricula.

However, this model can easily prompt generalisation. It often involves attempts to identify the 'essential' differences between groups of people. For example, this approach may foster the belief that all Muslims, or all Japanese people, share the same experiences, characteristics and attitudes. In turn, this belief informs the idea that people in each of these groups are likely to benefit from the same kinds of educational opportunities.

In some cases, this move to value difference is seen to be possible only in environments dedicated specifically to the needs of the group — single-sex classrooms, or schools for those with intellectual or physical disabilities, for example.

To return to the example of boys and literacy: a 'valuing difference' approach would seek to define the 'essence' of boys, and use this to help teach them English. In this model, teachers often end up defining boys as aggressive, talkative and active, with interests in sports, violence, outdoor activities and so on. They then try to reshape the English curriculum in ways which respond to these interests. Thus we end up with reading programs where boys are exposed only to 'macho' texts, or classrooms where boys are asked to undertake only oral assessment (not to mention bars in which blokes don't get served drinks with lemon in them ...).

Can you see the dilemma here? This perspective brings an important initial acknowledgement that people possess unique attributes, and that these attributes must be used to inform educational programs. At the same time, though, this perspective commonly leads us to characterise all members of a particular 'minority' or 'special interest' group as the same. We can end up treating all boys, or all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island students, or all intellectually disabled students, as

though they are the same. This can seem logical enough at first, but let's think about it for a minute: think of some characteristic about yourself that you share with another person — maybe the school you went to, the town you were born in, or your gender. Now think about some of the other things you have in common with that person. Do you think the same way? Are you interested in all the same things? Do you have the same abilities? The same learning style? The same ambitions? How would you feel if you were expected to have all these things in common with this person, just because you share one characteristic?

A further danger of this approach is that it can focus so much of our energy on responding to differences that we forget to pay attention to the *ways* in which these differences are developed (see model 3). For example, claims that boys are 'naturally' aggressive (and therefore in need of physical outlets) may ignore the ways in which boys *learn* to be aggressive, whether this is conscious or imprinted. This produces a self-fulfilling prophecy: we end up giving boys even more messages about what it means to be a stereotypical boy. In other words, we further entrench attitudes towards differences within the community by emphasising difference and separation rather than commonality and integration.

Finally, like the equal-opportunity model, this model tends to leave the 'mainstream' structures untouched by emphasising the importance of creating new environments for different people — say special classrooms for boys, or girls, or students with physical disabilities.

I am not suggesting that there are not very good reasons why these kinds of strategies might be used. Indigenous schools, for example, have been an invaluable strategy in terms of ensuring that indigenous students feel safe and valued in their learning environment. However, I would argue that it is important for us to be thinking about the ways in which we can break down divisions and distinctions between groups of people. Only then can we see individuals as they really are.

## Model 3: Socialisation

The third perspective on difference seeks to respond to some of the limitations of the previous two models by emphasising how we *learn* to act in particular ways. Using this model, people pay attention to the ways in which individuals learn the behaviours they are expected to display: how boys learn to act 'like boys'; how people from particular ethnic backgrounds learn to display particular characteristics.

Within this framework, we recognise the roles that our society generally, and schools specifically, play in socialising students — giving them messages about what is normal behaviour for them. Thus, we focus on the cultural norms that are circulated about what it means to be, for example, a boy or a girl (and, more specifically, a good boy and a good girl).

The strength of this model is that it highlights the ways in which meanings are attached to difference. It reminds us that we, as educators, play a part in this process. It shows us that in responding to the issue of boys and literacy, for example, we need to look beyond the idea that 'boys are like this' or 'give them books and they will read' to discover why some boys are not reading, how some have been taught to devalue literacy skills, and how we can intervene in this process.

Whilst the idea of difference as a social construct is very useful, there are still some issues it does not attend to. Firstly, it tends to go too far in denying the impact that things such as our bodies actually have on our lives. The fact that I have a woman's body, for example, impacts upon some of the experiences I can and do have. The fact that some people are physically unable to work, or to see, clearly has an impact upon their perceptions and experiences.

Secondly, this model tends to represent individuals as passive receptors in the face of massive, powerful agents of socialisation. Clearly, this isn't always the case. Whilst I have undoubtedly been exposed to thousands of messages about what it means to 'be a woman' — and whilst these messages have, at some stages, shaped my life — I have been able to say "Forget it!" when faced with some of the more limiting or absurd gender norms.

What we need, therefore, is a model that is able to recognise the existence of difference, identify the meanings that come to be attached to differences, acknowledge the consequences of these meanings, and enable the transformation of negative consequences. Such a model is provided by a contemporary approach to difference which I will explore now.

## Model 4: Transformation

This approach to difference is based on a commitment to acknowledging the valuable points made in the equal-opportunity, valuing-difference and socialisation approaches while also finding solutions to their weaknesses. It focuses on the ways in which meanings around difference are *constructed* and *circulated* as a basis for creating positive and inclusive alternatives. I refer to this approach as the *transformative* model*, because it emphasises the ways in which individuals can transform their own cultural context.

* In other contexts, I have referred to this model as a post-structural feminist approach to difference. Much has been written about post-structuralism and its relationship to educational practices. Some of this is very hard to read, confusing and seems to be a long way removed from the 'real' world of teaching. However, many valuable points are made within post-structural research. The work of Australians such as Bronwyn Davies, Rod Gilbert, Pam Gilbert, Jane Kenway, Bob Connell, Michael Garbutcheon Singh, Nola Alloway, Chris Bigum, Bill Green and Jo-Anne Reid illustrates the value of this approach. I will not make any particular use of post-structural terminology, but it is important to acknowledge that my approach to difference is consistent with a broadly post-structural tradition.

The transformative model has six key characteristics.

- It acknowledges that significant differences exist among the world's people.
- It recognises that our society works to attach meanings to these differences — often valuing some meanings at the expense of others.
- It acknowledges that these cultural meanings (or norms) can have a significant impact upon the ways in which individuals think about themselves and their lives.
- It recognises that people do not necessarily accept these meanings passively, but rather actively negotiate them in working to carve out their own sense of self.
- It recognises that whilst there are similarities among particular groups of people, there are always differences among these same groups.
- It works to create, circulate and validate new representations of differences that emphasise the equal value, status, significance and importance of all people.

In our boys and literacy example, a transformative perspective on difference would be interested in identifying how it is that some boys may learn to devalue literacy skills. It would focus on the cultural messages given to boys about what it means to be successful. It would look for texts that challenge narrow representations of boys, and seek to introduce boys to alternative ways of thinking about masculinity. All of this is based on the belief that there is more than one way of 'being a boy', and that boys have the ability to develop more 'literacy-friendly' perspectives. The transformative approach acknowledges the skills and perspectives that a particular boy might bring to any situation — such as an interest in football — but it doesn't claim that this is the beginning and the end of the boy's frame of reference. It seeks to identify the limitations that the boy experiences and to provide positive alternatives from which he can choose. In this model, traditional values are not devalued; rather, they are combined with non-traditional values in order to provide a richer and potentially more fulfilling set of life choices.

Working within this transformative model requires teachers to develop skills in recognising how norms about difference are constructed and circulated. It requires them to recognise the consequences of these norms, and it demands a commitment to creating positive alternatives to these limiting norms in their own educational practices. In other words, teachers need to become active and critical readers of the texts that circulate in the world around them — and, of course, in their own school and classrooms. The process people work through in order to critically read cultural texts is known, within the transformative model, as *textual analysis*.

Later in this book, I will discuss various ways in which the transformative model is used to make sense of particular activities and texts associated with schooling. First, however, it is important to explore the principles that underpin the transformative model, and to outline the skills of critical textual analysis. In the next chapter, therefore, I will outline key principles that are associated with transformative education and difference. This is particularly important; the transformative model can only work — indeed, can only exist — if certain points are accepted up front.

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# Chapter Two

## Making a difference to differences: The key principles of a transformative approach

This book aims to provide teachers with the resources that will equip them to think about and respond to difference in positive ways. In this chapter, I will outline the principles (Fig. 2.1) that underpin the transformative approach to education introduced in the previous chapter. This will provide a sound basis from which we can go on to explore various cultural texts in terms of what they say to us, and to students, about difference.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Meanings are produced. | Meanings are produced in particular contexts. | Meanings can change. | Communication involves choices. | We all circulate meanings. | Schools circulate meanings. | Norms are not normal. |

*Figure 2.1: The key principles of a transformative approach to education*

# Principle 1: Meanings are produced

In the introduction to this book, we began to explore the idea that different meanings are attached to different physical characteristics such as skin colour or body shape. We also acknowledged the fact that some of these meanings are seen as more positive than others; it is generally regarded as 'better', for example, to be thin than not.

So much of our energy goes into living with the consequences of these mythical norms that we can lose sight of the fact that they are not necessarily natural and not necessarily desirable. How many of us have started a diet, for example, for the sole reason that we wanted to 'look better' without ever stopping to question the belief that 'thinness' and 'beauty' are unproblematically connected? In other words, we can often get so distracted by the *consequences* of mythical norms that we fail to explore the ways in which they were *created* in the first place. We can get so used to seeing Christianity, for example, represented as normal — and adherents to other religions represented as strange (at best) and fanatical (at worst) — that we fail to recognise the extent to which we have been *taught* to attach meanings such as 'zealot' or 'fanatic' to images of Hinduism or Islam. It is similarly difficult to identify the ways in which we have been taught to attach other, less overtly hostile, meanings to 'other' religions, such as the kind of meditative passivity or vegetarianism that is often associated with Buddhism.

One of the starting points of transformative education is that meanings are never natural; they are produced. That is, we learn to associate certain meanings with certain characteristics, or signs. Let's explore this point in more detail.

Take a look at this picture (Fig. 2.2): tell me what you think you are looking at, and tell me how you would describe it.

*Figure 2.2: Portrait*

You will have identified this as a picture of Claudia Schiffer, or a model, or a beautiful woman. You may have described her with words such as 'beautiful', 'attractive' or 'sexy'. Even if you didn't use these terms, I'm sure you can think of many people who would have done.

Now look at this picture (Fig. 2.3) and tell me what you think of.

*Figure 2.3: Greeting card*

In the later half of the twentieth century and beyond, many people looking at this image of a greeting card will focus primarily on the large central cross. They might recognise the term *swastika*, and associate it with Nazi Germany. They might also associate it with war, with Adolf Hitler and with murderous discrimination against Jewish people.

The picture of the model who is described as beautiful and the picture of the swastika described as evil both illustrate the fact that meanings get attached to some kinds of images at particular historical points. This leads to our second organising principle.

# Principle 2: Meanings are produced in particular contexts

If we were to travel back in time, 100 years ago, the kind of woman who would earn the description 'beautiful' may have looked quite different from the picture of the model shown opposite. There would also be (and there remain) differences between what was seen as beauty in France, for example, and what was seen as beauty for women in China or Italy. So there is no 'natural' reason why the image of Claudia Schiffer makes us think 'beautiful'. Instead, this is a reaction that our culture trains us to have. Other cultures train people to have different kinds of reactions. Think about the kind of reaction someone who looked and dressed like Claudia Schiffer might get in some Asian or Islamic or Amish communities, for example.

Similarly, if we went back in time and location, the image of the cross shown above would not be associated with the term 'swastika', nor with Nazi Germany. Instead, it may have been called a *fylfot*, or a broken cross or a *gammadion*, and been associated with the four 'Ls' that comprise it — luck, love, light and life. According to some sources, the sign commonly known as a swastika is the oldest cross and emblem in the world, and has long been associated with good luck:


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*The swastika is a very old symbol with use widespread throughout the world … it traditionally had been a sign of good fortune and well being. The word "swastika" is derived from the Sanskrit "su" meaning "well" and "asti" meaning "being". It also is considered to be a representation of the sun and is associated with the worship of Aryan sun gods. It is a symbol in both Jainism and Buddhism, as well as a Nordic runic emblem and a Navajo sign.*

Source: About.com (2001) '20th Century History'. About.com Inc.

What we can see, therefore, is that the meanings that have become attached to these particular signs reflect the values of particular communities of people at particular historical contexts in particular cultural groups. The same image can have more than one meaning, depending on the context within which it is read.

Let's think about the image of the crucifix. To a Catholic person today, the crucifix might be a symbol of Christ, or God, or Christianity; to a Jewish person today, the crucifix might be a symbol of Jesus, a prophet; to a Roman soldier in the first century, the crucifix might have been a symbol of treachery and religious betrayal; to a teenager in Tasmania, the crucifix might be a symbol of jewellery; to a horror-movie buff, it might be a symbol of vampires. I could (probably!) go on.

The point is that almost every image we can think of, almost every word, can have more than one signification, and that the most common or dominant meaning generally reflects the cultural and historical context within which the image/word is located.

See if you can do an activity like this yourself. Think of an image (such as a picture of a cigarette, or the word 'cool', or the colour purple) and see if you can think of four different meanings for that image in four different contexts (Fig 2.4).

| **Image:** | |
|---|---|
| Meaning 1 | Cultural context |
| Meaning 2 | Cultural context |
| Meaning 3 | Cultural context |
| Meaning 4 | Cultural context |

*Figure 2.4: An image and its multiple meanings*

Through this activity, you have demonstrated your understanding that meaning always relates to a particular context. In other words, the same image can have different meanings in different times and locations. This is a vital point for two reasons. First, it is common for us to look at the various images and texts that make up our world as though they are natural. It is common to become desensitised to the ways in which some images are associated with beauty or intelligence, for example, while others are

excluded. This can lead to a certain complacency — we don't question the beliefs that underlie so many of the resources that might well have been central to our teaching for years. However, if we start accepting the fact that meanings are always produced, and not natural, then we have to take responsibility for the choices we make about the kinds of images and meanings we choose to continue to circulate.

Second, if we can accept that the same thing — the same colour, or shape, for example — can have different meanings in different contexts, then we can also imagine that the meanings attached to some things — such as skin colour or body shape — are not fixed or permanent. This leads us to our third principle.

# Principle 3: Meanings can change

The recognition that meanings are not fixed or permanent opens up the possibility of us imagining that things can be different. It allows us to picture a world within which judgements are not made according to the colour of our skin, or the faith we adhere to, or our gender or our weight or our wealth. It reminds us that the meanings we negotiate in our day-to-day lives could, in fact, be otherwise. This, in turn, opens up the important possibility that we can help to create the kind of positive cultural change that will result in differences being valued equally and in different people being treated equitably. This is a very empowering point. It is easy for teachers to be overwhelmed by all the various responsibilities they seem to be landed with year after year. One of the things that can help sustain teacher commitment, however, is the sense that the work they do on a day-to-day basis can generate positive cultural change.

Take a simple example. Fifteen years ago, students in schools would have had trouble coming up with any kind of explanation of the term 'environment'. Similarly, Australian students would have found it almost impossible to say anything positive (if anything at all) about the notion of indigenous land rights. Now, however, both of these terms have many positive connotations. This is because people like teachers have worked on a day-to-day basis to introduce new meanings into their society. They have helped students (and, by extension, parents and others) to learn new ways of talking about particular issues. In other words, they have brought about positive change.

This doesn't mean, of course, that there aren't various myths associated with the environment that are now in circulation. It might be possible to argue, for instance, that lots of students can now make use of terms like 'ozone layer' and 'global warming' without really knowing what they mean. Nevertheless, the point remains that new stories about the world, and our place in it, can be brought into existence, and can become just as powerful as those that they seek to challenge. The key issue here is that we need to become aware of the fact that every time we communicate, we are effectively making choices about what we will or will not include, what we will or will not represent positively, and what we will or will not value. This, then, is our fourth principle.

# Principle 4: Communication involves choices

If we accept that every time we communicate, it is possible for us to send messages that do much more than operate at a technical level, and if we accept that we always make choices when we construct texts, then it is logical to embrace the idea that almost every act of communication we are part of could have been different.

This, of course, is something we already know. How many times have you reflected on a conversation and thought "Oh, I should have said ..." or, just as bad, "Oh, I shouldn't have said ...". This shows our ability to reflect upon the consequences of what we do or don't say. This ability extends beyond immediate and personal acts of communication to the messages we circulate about difference.

Let me give a brief example. A little while ago, I was in a room with some kindergarten-aged children. One of these, a girl of about three, was demonstrating her hopping technique to an admiring teacher. The teacher made comments like "Yes, that's excellent" and "Oh, aren't you clever?". After a while, the teacher's attention turned to another child. The original girl, possibly to try and regain teacher focus, began rolling around on the floor, saying "Look at me; I can roll, too". The teacher turned back to the girl, who was waving her legs in the air, and said "Oh, you mustn't be a lady any more". "What?" said the girl. The teacher replied: "Ladies don't roll around with their legs in the air". The girl looked confused (and by now she had definitely stopped rolling around) and said "But I am a lady ...". The teacher moved away.

Here is an example of a teacher choosing to respond to a particular action in a particular way. We know that this teacher has more than one set response to a child's efforts to demonstrate skills, as we have already heard the comments "Aren't you clever?" and so on. But faced with an action that the she didn't approve of, the teacher chose to make a somewhat censorious response. This girl was clearly being taught something about the teacher's (and the society's) expectations of girls/women. A choice was made, a particular set of words and actions were joined together, and a powerful lesson was taught.

Let's accept that the teacher just didn't want the girl rolling around because there happened to be lots of other kids trying to play in that same space. In what other ways could that message have been communicated?

The point here is that in this small, everyday incident, a teacher had to make a choice (whether conscious or otherwise) about how to respond to a student. The choice the teacher made has consequences that extend beyond the particular instance. This leads us to the next key principle.

# Principle 5: We all circulate meanings

Meaning — and the circulation of meanings — isn't something that happens 'out there', or in some other world. We are all constantly involved in the process of circulating meanings. Every time we say "Thank you" to a child, we communicate our belief that saying thank you is an important social skill. Every time we go to school wearing a nose ring and displaying a tattoo, we are communicating our belief that teachers can present themselves in a range of ways. To generalise: if someone sees or hears us doing something, then we are communicating with them, and there is no communication without the exchange of meaning.

This may all appear obvious. But the reason it is an important point in the context of this book is that, just as we are constantly communicating, so too are we regularly communicating our own (and others') beliefs about difference. This isn't happening only when we talk about a topic explicitly. Many people reveal their beliefs about multiculturalism or gender equity in their day-to-day conversations (you will be able to think of examples of people who express their opinions around these topics in no uncertain terms).

But we are also communicating our beliefs when we do less obvious things, such as selecting texts, assignment topics and so on. If we set an assignment on 'Great Adventurers', for example, and provide the students with a list of six examples, we are communicating something to them about our definition of great adventurers. Think about this list, for instance:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Captain James Cook | Edmund Hilary | Francis Drake |
| Marco Polo | Christopher Columbus | Burke & Wills |

What messages do students get from a list such as this? Think back to the eight paradigms of difference covered in the introduction: how much diversity from those eight categories can be found in this list?

Now think about what would happen if we added these names:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Amelia Earhart | Jessie Martin | Louise Sauvage |
| Fred Hollows | Ludwig van Beethoven | Mohammed Jinnah |

See how the whole notion of what counts as an 'adventurer' is challenged by this kind of addition?

These are the kinds of points we will explore in more detail in subsequent chapters. Here, the point I am trying to emphasise is that every single thing we do in our classrooms (and outside of them, too, for that matter) has the potential to

communicate something about our attitudes generally, and our beliefs concerning difference specifically. This leads us to our sixth principle.

# Principle 6: Schools circulate meanings

For educators to make productive contributions in the area of difference, it is vital that teaching is understood not just as a job, or as a profession, but as a cultural activity that serves to construct meaning (see Hammond (ed.), 2001). Schools, just like the rest of society, are involved in circulating meanings about various images of difference. Regardless of how wide the gap sometimes appears to be between in-school and out-of-school activities, schools (and their students) are not isolated from the 'real world'; what happens in classrooms is intimately connected to what happens in homes, in offices, on the street and in the press.

This is an extremely important point. Teaching is often represented as a job that requires teachers to be 'above' current debates ("That's not really a topic for a classroom") or to be neutral in relation to 'sensitive' issues such as religion or land rights, for example ("You'll need to ask your parents about that"). This is often justified by claims that parents would be upset if their kids were taught things contrary to their own beliefs, or, similarly, that a teacher does not have any right to challenge students' thoughts or opinions about the world.

It is easy to understand the pressures that would encourage teachers to take up this 'neutral' stance. Neutrality is, though, an impossible goal for teachers to aspire to. As Edward Said (1994:21) has written: "Politics is everywhere; there can be no escape into the realms of pure art and thought, or, for that matter, into the realm of disinterested objectivity". Indeed, neutrality is an impossible goal for any communicating human. Regardless of whether or not we address issues (say, disabilities, or anorexia nervosa) in an overt fashion in our classrooms, students still get messages about the extent to which we value or devalue various issues and perspectives. If a student goes through an entire year of schooling in my classroom — within which time we study topics as diverse as Canadian culture, Olympic sports, world wars and twentieth-century fashion — but never hears mention of the native Inuit people of Canada, or the Paralympics, or the role of women in the war, then s/he is getting the unstated but still very powerful message that what I have taught (the traditional stories about culture, sport and war) is more valuable than any alternative perspective.

In other words, whether we like it or not, our classrooms are places within which students are exposed both to our beliefs and to the beliefs of the society within which they live. Schools do not exist in a vacuum. In an environment where people spend up to 40 hours every week together, it is impossible that individuals will not communicate at least something about what they believe — what they value, what they like, what they approve and disapprove of, what they see as normal, what they

see as natural and, by extension, what they see as unnatural or undesirable. Any of you who have heard a student justify something they have said with a sentence introduced "But Mr/Miss/Ms/Mrs Lee said ..." will know what I am talking about here! Teachers have a powerful role in most cultural contexts. They are well positioned either to perpetuate mythical norms or to challenge these norms and help to create richer, more accurate, more equitable and more fulfilling images of the world.

This poses a real challenge for educators. In many cases, we are drawing on educational resources, or curriculum documents, which are themselves fairly narrow in the view of the world they represent. This helps to make these views appear natural or normal. If we ourselves have only seen books about the history of Canada which exclude mention of its indigenous population, then it is a tough task for us to recognise that there is something missing in these texts.

However, if we are serious about responding to difference, these are the kinds of things that we need to train ourselves to notice and respond to. In order to deal with difference positively in our classrooms, we have to examine our own beliefs about it. We have to ask ourselves tough questions about what we really think about people with skin a different colour from ours; what we really think about people with a different sexual preference; what we really believe about gender norms. It is difficult to authenticate a message of inclusiveness to a group of students if we do not, ourselves, believe the message. This gets to the heart of the matter. To engage productively with issues of difference in our professional lives, we need to operate from a position that wishes to value difference. Our seventh organising principle, then, is that people can, indeed, be different and yet equal.

# Principle 7: Norms are not normal

This is one of the last points I wish to make in this chapter, but one of the most important. Many people approach difference as something we tolerate. In this mindset, tolerance is seen as a gift that 'we' (the 'normal' people) bestow on others less fortunate. It allows us to cling to the idea that we are, indeed, part of the mythical norm and that while other unfortunate people are not, we must still be charitable towards them. What is fundamentally wrong here is that any of us should assume the right to decide what is or is not a normal set of characteristics.

One of the arguments that arises here is that because the 'majority' of people believe in a certain practice (heterosexuality, for example) or have a certain feature (white skin, for instance), they are justified in representing these attributes as normative or 'proper'. Quite apart from the fact that this is little more than a version of bullying — 'Might is right', a perspective we would probably not tolerate in our families or schools — this argument misses the fact that, by one criterion or another, most of us who are engaging with this book are in the minority. Consider the following statistics.

If the world's population were reduced to 100 people (with all existing ratios in place):

- there would be 57 Asians, 21 Europeans, 14 from the Western Hemisphere (North and South) and 8 Africans
- 51 would be female, 49 would be male, 70 would be non-white, 30 white
- 70 would be non-Christian, 30 Christian
- 50% of our local community's wealth would be in the hands of only 6 people — and all 6 would be citizens of the United States
- 80 would live in substandard housing
- 70 would be unable to read
- 50 would suffer from malnutrition
- one would be near death, one would be near birth
- one would have a college education
- no one would own a computer.

Source: Harter, P (2001) 'Of Interest'. *Northwest Notes*, April–June. University of Alaska, Anchorage.

When we consider figures such as this, it is easy to recognise that what we are often trained to view as 'normal' is, in fact, no more normal than anything else. What counts as normality reflects our own perspective.

# A word on ethics and morals

There is one final point I must make in this chapter. In arguing for the celebration of difference, I am not arguing for an abandonment of what might be termed morals or ethics. Each of us has our own moral code which sees certain behaviours or attitudes as wrong. Intolerance of racial difference, for example, is one of the attitudes I believe is wrong. And there are other things, such as domestic violence, child abuse and environmental vandalism, that I believe cannot be tolerated because they infringe, in one way or another, on other people's quality of life.

Each of you must make your own judgements about the code of morality or ethics which frames your approach to difference. What I encourage most strongly is learning to distinguish between those things which you genuinely believe to be harmful and wrong, and those which you have been trained to see as wrong, even though they may harm no one at all. How many wars, how much conflict, how much sadness could have been avoided if people had tested their beliefs and learnt to identify where they had come from in the first place? How many of our values have we simply inherited or absorbed? And how many of these unchallenged beliefs are we passing on to our friends, our families, our children, our students?

# Conclusion

This, chapter, then, has laid out the 'mindset', if you like, with which I approach issues of difference in classrooms. Working to celebrate difference is not easy. Many of the meanings attached to markers of difference have often been around for so long that they have begun to appear as natural. Working to denaturalise these meanings, and to show the ways in which we are taught to link some characteristics to some meanings, is the work of textual analysis. We will focus on this work in the next three chapters.

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## A common question

***There are some things that I just don't feel are right. For example, I just don't think that homosexuality is natural. In my classrooms, do I have to pretend that I think it is?***

As teachers, we need always to keep in mind the impact that our own beliefs can have on the students in our care. We need to think through what is at stake. Our society does involve a range of sexualities. If we only ever acknowledge the validity of one type of sexuality, we are sending out messages that, ultimately, can work to encourage homophobia. In many instances, these messages can foster violence towards people whose only 'crime' is that they are different from you.

So the question is: do we think people who are homosexual deserve to be punished because of this? My answer to this is an emphatic no. On the other hand, I believe that people who engage in sexual practices that are harmful to others — paedophilia or rape, for example — definitely *do* need to be punished (both via the legal system and through a set of cultural practices that work explicitly to devalue and censor this kind of behaviour). This is because they are taking away another person's right to make choices.

These are my personal feelings about the issue. I would therefore try to use inclusive and positive language should the topic of sexuality arise in the classroom. This doesn't mean I'd necessarily go out of my way to introduce the issue, but it does mean that I wouldn't ignore or endorse anti-gay language or practices when I encountered them.

Ultimately, an educator has to make individual choices about how to deal with issues, and I certainly do not encourage pretence. What I would hope, however, is that if we introduce a perspective on an issue, we can also acknowledge that it *is* a perspective, and not necessarily the one and only or 'right' response. This means trying to identify some of the sources that shape a perspective and highlighting the fact that other perspectives are available. We also need to make it clear that a particular perspective is not the last word. To return to a point I made earlier: we now have new, positive ways to talk about concepts such as environmental sustainability and indigenous land rights. That

does not mean that people no longer carry concerns and reservations about approaches to these issues. It means, rather, that the language and the stories around these issues have been included — naturalised — so that there is a healthy and positive basis for discussion. We *can* hold on to reservations — everybody has them about one thing or another. But if we are earnest about inclusivity, we have a responsibility to explore the rich, diverse, constructive and life-enhancing contributions of all kinds of people — and that includes people who identify themselves as gay.

## Activity

Locate a copy of a magazine, or newspaper. If possible, find one that you are interested in or read regularly. Go through the magazine and note the various images of people that you see. How many men and women are there? What ages are they? What are they doing? How many different skin colours are represented? How many able-bodied people and how many disabled people are there? What do you think your findings tell us about what our culture — or the culture within which the text was produced — thinks about the roles of men, women, people of colour, white people, able and disabled people?



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# Chapter Three

## What happens next?
## Doing transformative analysis

Okay: I have outlined the principles that shape the way I think about the 'big picture' associated with difference. This big picture, however, must also be scaled down so that individual educators can relate it to their own context. So we also need to explore the specific steps or strategies that can be applied when we try to analyse our own environment in order to evaluate how differences are being dealt with at any particular moment, or how things may be improved by introducing particular reform strategies.

In other words, we need skills that allow us to *analyse* the texts (spoken, written, visual, multimedia) that we circulate in relation to difference, and to *produce* texts that deal transformatively with difference. Given that we can think about what we *might* do in much the same way as we think about what we *already* do, it is logical that both analysis and production depend upon similar kinds of skills.

In this chapter, therefore, I want to spell out the key analytical criteria that I find most useful when thinking about ways of moving towards positive responses to difference in classrooms. The specific framework that I will outline can be given a number of names. In other contexts, I have referred to it as textual analysis, or critical textual analysis. In this book, I will use the term *transformative analysis* to describe the kinds of questions and reflections that I believe are necessary to support positive responses to difference within various educational settings. Let me talk a bit more about this term.

# Transformative analysis

In the previous chapter, I supported an approach to dealing with difference that moves away from equal-opportunity or valuing-difference models towards a framework that is able to acknowledge and attend to the multiple ways in which meanings associated with difference are circulated. This framework enables us to recognise that while everything we do in a classroom has the potential to affect how others think about and respond to difference, not everything we do is subject to regular analysis. In fact, much of what goes on in school settings — in curriculum, teacher talk, student talk or in the playground — has come to appear as natural and normal. Because of this, we need to develop the ability to think through the everyday practices that make up school life. Precisely because these practices are often so much a part of our routine, we need to learn how to step back from them and examine them in the light of some of the issues we have already introduced.

This book has no point at all unless we accept one more fundamental premise: ***not every individual experiences the same educational environment in the same way***. As I noted earlier, the marks of difference that make up our bodies — our skin colour, physical appearance, gender, ability and many other factors — all determine how people generally and traditionally respond to us as individuals. As anyone who has ever felt out of place at a social gathering can attest, there is a very big difference between being merely included in an environment and feeling safe, natural or valued within that environment. Our first step in creating classrooms where difference is not only included but also celebrated is to step back from the practices that we might be familiar with, or used to, in order to see how they deal with difference. To do this, we can work through several key steps.

## Steps in transformative analysis

Let's begin by stating the steps in transformative analysis (Fig. 3.1).

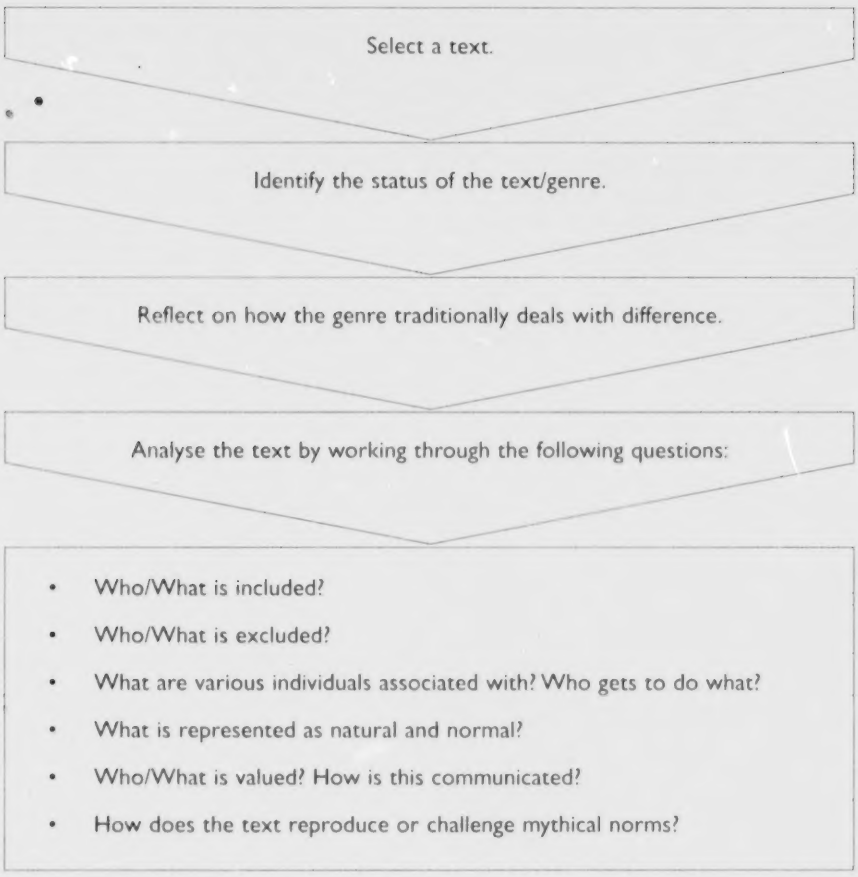
Select a text.
Identify the status of the text/genre.
Reflect on how the genre traditionally deals with difference.
Analyse the text by working through the following questions:
• Who/What is included?
• Who/What is excluded?
• What are various individuals associated with? Who gets to do what?
• What is represented as natural and normal?
• Who/What is valued? How is this communicated?
• How does the text reproduce or challenge mythical norms?

*Figure 3.1: The steps of transformative analysis*

Let's look at each of these steps in more detail.

### Select a text

This is the easy part! Every educational environment is made up of hundreds of texts. It is possible to undertake a transformative textual analysis by focusing on one particular text — such as a story book, or a poster — or to study a whole *textual environment*, such as a classroom. By environment here, I am referring to all the things that help to make up a particular location. So in relation to a primary classroom, for example, the environment is composed of the students (and how they speak to each other); the teacher (and all the things s/he says and does); the various books, magazines, posters and so on that are found within the room; any resources that are

used such as movies, computer games, guest speakers; anything at all, in fact, which has the capacity to communicate meaning.

It is often easiest to start the process of analysis with a text that has a written or visual form — like a poster or a book or something else that can be easily studied in depth — but any kind of text can tell us something about the way difference is dealt with. One of the harder things to do is to pick a text that we are rather attached to, such as a set of instructions for a class assignment that we have used for several years, or a favourite story book. Where you choose to start the analytical journey is, however, up to you.

For the purposes of this chapter, I am going to focus the analysis on one relatively common type of text — a fairy tale. Specifically, I'm going to look at *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.

We've now selected a text. Before we interrogate the text itself, we need to ask ourselves something about its status.

## Identify the status of the text/genre

When I refer to the status of the text, I'm talking about the *value* it has in a particular context. This is an important point to consider, because some texts that are quite inclusive of difference actually have very low status, and may have currency only within particular subcultures. At the same time, other, less-inclusive texts may be referred to in a regular and widely circulated way. Think about the different resources that you use in your classroom, for example. There will be some things, like books, stories and posters, that students see regularly. Others, such as guest speakers or movies, may be seen only once a year. This *visibility* is one way in which we can assess the relative value or status of texts.

There will also be differences in the way a teacher values various texts. It is generally safe to say, for instance, that teachers place higher value on class books than comics, or on teacher–student talk than student–student talk. So although we might find instances of certain kinds of texts existing in classrooms, this doesn't mean that they are highly valued within that classroom.

Being able to make this distinction is important. To give a very blunt example, it is one thing to find a text that represents Indigenous Australians positively. It is another thing to find out whether or not that text is ever actually seen, read or investigated by the people in a particular classroom. If it stays on a shelf and is never referred to by a teacher, it is possible to say that it has lower status (and is therefore less influential) than a text that is regularly referred to.

To relate this back to the fairy tale that we are considering in this example: I believe it is possible to argue that many teachers and students (at least in lower-primary or early-childhood settings) place relatively high value on fairy tales. I argue this because they still proliferate in classrooms, they are often used as story-time texts, they are

regularly referred to during other activities (such as when children are encouraged to write their own fairy tale, or to dress up and act out favourite fairy tales), and they are rarely subjected to critique (although many English teachers are aware of the potential for applying critical-literacy techniques to fairy tales).

Having identified the status of a genre, it is important to consider how texts belonging to that genre have generally dealt with difference. This is our next step.

## Reflect on how the genre traditionally deals with difference

In order to make an informed and critical analysis of the way a particular text perpetuates or challenges traditional representations of difference, it is important to reflect upon the context provided by the genre of the text. This means that we need to be aware of how a fairy tale, for instance, traditionally copes with attributes from various paradigms of difference. This doesn't require a lot of reflection. If we ask ourselves, for instance, about the cultural background, physical abilities and physical appearances of the central characters in our popular fairy tales, we can soon see that the 'good guys' follow traditional white, European, able-bodied, attractive norms, while those outside this set are either excluded or cast mostly in the role of villains (think ugly step-sisters, evil trolls, wicked witches and so on.)

This step can be as lengthy or as brief as required. (Teachers doing this kind of activity with students will often encourage them to research a genre thoroughly before they introduce them to a particular text that may challenge that genre.) What is necessary is an understanding of the *conventions* of the genre, so that the analysis can be located historically, culturally and generically. From this basis, we move into the heart of transformative analysis.

## Analyse the text

As introduced above, transformative analysis is the process we use to understand how and why texts are constructed in particular ways. This involves 'breaking down' texts — looking at the meanings they communicate and the consequences that they have. The following questions help us to achieve this:

- Who/What is included?
- Who/What is excluded?
- What are various individuals associated with? Who gets to do what?
- What is represented as natural and normal?
- Who/What is valued? How is this communicated?
- How does the text reproduce or challenge mythical norms?

To illustrate how the questions can help to frame analysis, I'll work through each one briefly now, using *Snow White* as the text. While there are many versions of this

particular text, I am hoping that most of the readers of this book will be familiar enough with one version or another to be able to see the kinds of points that I am making.

**Who/What is included?**

Answering this question asks us to map the kinds of people and activities that are represented within a particular text. This means looking in detail at the kinds of characters in a text and working through the paradigms of difference introduced earlier (p 13). How much detail you choose to go into is up to you. I generally try to get a comprehensive map showing not only the 'big' players but also the minor characters — identifying who is worthy of only a minor role often tells us something about the text's values, too.

*Snow White*, therefore, generally contains the following characters:

- A princess
- The princess's father
- The princess's mother
- The princess's stepmother
- Seven dwarfs
- A prince
- Sundry servants/woodsmen etc.

To get an accurate picture of what these characters tell us about the text's attitude towards difference, however, we need to examine those listed above against the various paradigms of difference. An exhaustive analysis would look at every single character. For the purposes of efficiency, I'll focus here on the main characters only, and draw attention to the specific qualities associated with each of them.

Let's start with the princess. The first point to make is that it is not enough to just say that the text is about a princess. Instead, we need to acknowledge that most of the text is about a young, white, physically able, physically attractive, European-looking, financially secure, heterosexual female princess. Similarly, her parents are white, financially secure (a perk of royalty!), physically able, physically attractive and so on.

The stepmother is an interesting character. She, too, is shown to be white, well-off and attractive, but, interestingly, middle-aged (although still attractive) and childless.

The prince, consistent with the other characters, is also white, physically able, handsome, heterosexual, and financially secure.

Across the main characters, therefore, there is little variation, with only the stepmother appearing slightly out of sync with the fairy-tale norm (although even she conforms to the norm for female villains).

The other key characters are, of course, the dwarfs. Here we can acknowledge that they certainly depart from the fairy-tale standard of good looks (being both dwarfs and rather unusual-looking). It is still important to acknowledge that they are nevertheless white, male and financially self-sufficient.

**Who/What is excluded?**

We now have a rough map of who is included in this fairy tale. From this basis, we can see who is left out. Consulting our paradigms of difference, we can see that there are no characters from non-European backgrounds; there are few characters who are unattractive; there are few characters who are disabled; and there are certainly no characters living outside of heterosexual norms.

Mapping who is included/excluded only gives us some of the picture, however. We need to build on this by identifying how the included characters are represented, and the kinds of skills associated with them. This leads to the next step of transformative analysis.

**What are various individuals associated with? Who gets to do what?**

If we go back to our list of characters, we can start to identify differences in the behaviours or characteristics they display.

Let's start with the princess. As is traditional in the fairy-tale genre, Snow White is described as beautiful. She is also portrayed as sweet-natured, sensitive, trusting, innocent and naïve. In addition, she is portrayed in a nurturing role while caring for the dwarfs and, once she has bitten the apple, in a passive state, unable to rescue herself and dependent upon the actions of others to rescue her.

In contrast, the stepmother is portrayed as vain, self-centred, dishonest, conniving, evil and jealous of Snow White.

In this way, an interesting tension is set up between the major two female characters in the story: on the one hand is the young, beautiful, innocent, fit-to-be adored Snow White, who has a whole future ahead of her with a handsome prince (a future presumably involving more little Snow Whites frolicking around some suitably harmonious castle). On the other hand is the older, equally beautiful (at least in most versions — in some, she reverts to an image of a witch when Snow White re-awakens), vicious, jealous and nasty woman who does everything possible to destroy the threat to her sense of identity.

It is not hard to see who is being valued here, but I will return to this point in more detail in a moment. Let's look at the two other main characters/character sets.

First there are the dwarfs, each of whom is represented in a caricatured manner. It is possible to argue that despite their endeavour as miners, the dwarfs represent seven facets of childhood. Each dwarf is associated primarily with three things: hard work, a quite particular personality (Sleepy, Grumpy and so on) and a love for the mother figure of Snow White (a role she fills with ease, even though she is generally represented as quite young).

Then, of course, there is the prince. He exhibits many of the characteristics typically associated with lead males in fairy tales. Not only does he match the description physically, he is also given skills and abilities that equate with the male hero. He is active, brave, loyal, dedicated and, of course, given the responsibility for rescuing the princess. He is motivated in this almost solely by her beauty (he falls in love with a stranger in a coma!).

The contrasts between the various characters are therefore quite marked. The dwarfs are loyal, but ineffectual in rescuing Snow White, whereas the older, able-bodied prince is the traditional hero. The prince is active and heroic, whereas the princess is beautiful and passive (except in her nurturing duties). The stepmother is jealous and horrid, whereas the younger, more attractive girl is generous and lovely. In comparing and contrasting all of these characters, it is possible to see that there is, once again, a hierarchy of values and characteristics. Comparing and contrasting the various characters makes it easier for us to answer the next two key questions.

**What is represented as natural and normal?**

Having developed a map of the characters in a text, it is important to identify what is seen as normal for the various characters. In the case of *Snow White*, quite different behaviour patterns are set up as normal or natural for the different character groups. For Snow White, it appears natural that she takes on the nurturing role for the dwarfs, that she falls victim to the schemes of the wicked stepmother, and that she is delighted to find herself brought back to life by a handsome prince. Certainly, there is nothing in the narrative to suggest that she may have been surprised, annoyed, irritated or anything other than totally accepting of her situation.

Similarly, the innocent dwarfs are shown as content with their lives — happy to have a strange woman come in and take over their domestic arrangements. The prince, too, thinks nothing of bringing the young princess back from the dead. He invests no time in wondering whether or not she is likely to welcome or reject such an intimate invasion of her personal space. And, of course, the wicked stepmother is shown as naturally evil. There is no attempt made to explain why she might act the way she does, nor to portray her as motivated by any force other than jealousy. The implication is, of course, that this middle-aged and barren woman would be jealous of the younger, more desirable (more fertile?) competition.

What we can see in answering this question is that quite different sets of behaviour are represented as natural or normal, depending upon the other characteristics (gender, age, physical ability and so on) of the people involved. Similarly, characters are valued differently within the text.

**Who/What is valued? How is this communicated?**

When analysing fairy tales, we don't usually need to work too hard to work out who the good guys and the bad guys actually are. Generally, this is signalled by pretty clear distinctions. There are those whose fairy-tale lives are interrupted by some crisis or

challenge, who struggle to overcome adversity and who ultimately live happily ever after (generally in heterosexual wedded bliss), and there are those who, in some way or another, are reviled, rejected or punished. What is most interesting is that the characters are rewarded or punished in different ways. Snow White herself is rewarded (with the requisite husband) for her compliant passivity, while the stepmother is punished for her desires.

When we conduct this kind of analysis, we get a good picture of the kinds of characters that we are supposed to admire and the kinds of characters we are supposed to reject. It also doesn't take too long before we start to identify the fact that different kinds of characters (men versus women, or old versus young, for instance) are expected to behave (and are rewarded for behaving) in quite different ways. It is not just that characters are rewarded for being good. Rather, we see different definitions of 'good' applied to the different character types.

This pattern is repeated over and over within particular genres. We can make sense of the narrative of *Snow White* because we are familiar with the *pattern* of the story. We also know what to expect the moment we see Cinderella and the wicked stepmother introduced in that story, or when we hear about Rapunzel locked in her tower, or when we listen to the introduction to *Sleeping Beauty*.

In other words, texts like *Snow White* are significant not just because of what they tell us about cultural attitudes towards gender and race, but because these particular stories are repeated over and over again. This leads us to the final question.

**In what way does the text reproduce or challenge mythical norms?**

In the introductory chapters, I argued that the kinds of people most likely to be portrayed positively within diverse Australian cultural texts are those who are white, middle-class, ethnically European, physically attractive, financially secure, physically able, heterosexual and Christian. We also know that these norms are gendered so that white, middle-class, attractive women, for example, are associated with skills and activities quite different from those of men of the same background. In other words, there are mythical norms that circulate about what it means to be a good or natural Australian woman or man.

When we analyse texts such as *Snow White*, it is possible to locate them within a broader set of cultural traditions to assess the extent to which they reproduce or challenge these norms. This is generally achieved by looking at patterns associated with the genre generally. As we discussed above, *Snow White* conforms to all the generic characteristics that have been associated with fairy tales, and thus reproduces narrow and limiting representations of the various character types.

In other words, by conducting a transformative analysis, we can see that there is very little that is transformative about this kind of story line. It perpetuates myths and continues to exclude and/or devalue those characters who depart from the mythical norm. How hard is it to come up with a fairy tale where the heroine rescues herself?

Or where the prince is black? Or ugly? Over recent years, some of these more transformative texts have, of course, come into circulation. Books such as *The Paper Bag Princess* and *Princess Smartypants* certainly challenge gender norms for fairy tales, as do popular movies such as *Ever After* and *Shrek*. Even some established texts such as *Horton Hatches the Egg* work to challenge some issues associated with cultural norms. After all, it is Horton (the faithful, resident egg-sitter, who stays with the egg) and not Maisie (the fly-away mother) who is recognised as the primary caregiver when the elephant-bird finally hatches. To take another example, from Dr Seuss: *The Sneetches* is based explicitly on critiquing the ways in which meanings are attached to differences (such as the presence or absence of stars on one's belly), and the random and arbitrary nature of these meanings. So it is not necessarily the age of a text that determines its transformative potential; rather, it is how it deals with particular paradigms of difference.

There are two other points that I need to make briefly here. First, all of the texts I've named above — texts that *do* seem to challenge genre conventions — nevertheless operate, to a certain extent, within the broad conventions of the fairy tale. If they stepped entirely outside of the genre, there is a real chance that they would totally alienate or confuse an audience who is used to making sense of texts by comparing them to established genres. Whilst staying within some broadly familiar spaces, however, these texts take the reader into some unexpected spaces — not so fast as to risk losing or seriously offending the reader, but in a nevertheless very deliberate fashion.

Second, some texts, from some genres, will always appear transformative if they are read alongside other texts from another genre. A Dreaming narrative, for instance, will almost always appear as a challenge to the story-telling conventions of various Western narratives. At one level, this means that these texts can be regarded as inherently non-traditional and transformative. However, it is important to acknowledge that within an indigenous cultural context, *these texts may be the norm*. This means that they will represent their own mythical norms and may, themselves, include only narrow images of differences. What it *can* mean, though, is that by getting texts from different cultural contexts to rub up against each other, we can help to expose the constructed nature of the text, and thus open up the possibility that the text we are studying could always have been different.

# The key points

Every text in our educational environment can be analysed in the way I have just outlined in order to determine how it deals with characteristics from the various paradigms of difference. By conducting a transformative analysis of the characters and story line of *Snow White*, it becomes clear that this is an example of a text which celebrates and privileges particular understandings about what it means to be male and female, what it means to be beautiful or ugly, and what it means to be a childless woman.

The authors of the text (or the various people who have rewritten it over the years) have made deliberate choices about how they will represent the characters, and who will be shown positively and who will be portrayed negatively. They have selected individual characteristics that could always have been different. For instance, when considering the skin colour of their heroes, they chose white skin out of all the possible variations. When considering the gender of the rescuer, they chose a male. Every text is the end result of a lot of choices, regardless of whether or not these choices have been made consciously.

Every day when we communicate with people, we select the most effective and efficient signs to get a message across. When we make our selection, we search through a big pool of possible signs — a *paradigm* (see p 13) — and choose the one we think will work best.

The kinds of choices we make from paradigms reflect two things. On the first level, they reflect our ability to communicate in a *technically* effective way. If I want to know the time, for example, and choose to ask a stranger what the time is by leaping up and down and making noises like Big Ben, there's a fair chance that my selection of signs won't be all that well understood. Similarly, if I am scorer for a cricket team and put up the score as $(6 \div 2)\ 4\ (122 + 3\pi)$, there's a fair chance that people won't be all that clear about what I mean.

Our communication always operates, therefore, at a technical level. At another level, however, the signs that we select in our day-to-day communication also reflect our *values*. To give a brief example, the fact that I choose *not* to communicate that I am annoyed with a child by swearing, or yelling, reflects my beliefs about appropriate schooling.

When we apply this kind of logic to texts such as *Snow White*, we can argue that every single decision that was made by the authors of that text tells us something about their values — their beliefs, their views about the world. This doesn't necessarily mean that they sat down and thought "Gee, what do I think a beautiful princess looks like?". Often, our beliefs about these kinds of things are so closely tied to wider cultural beliefs that we don't give them a second thought — they're just natural. The real issue here is that because these choices seem so logical, they are very easy to reproduce (like buying pink clothes for girls and blue for boys ...). I can recall being in a classroom where a teacher corrected a student's own fairy tale by saying "You can't have the princess as the hero; that's not how fairy tales work". In that instance, the teacher was accepting what her culture had told her about particular types of text and passing on to the student all the beliefs and values attached to that particular genre.

What I am hoping is that by working through the steps in transformative analysis outlined above, we will get better at identifying the seemingly natural or normal practices that dominate in our culture, and that we will get particularly good at learning to recognise the effects these practices have on attitudes towards difference.

What we are focusing on is learning to recognise the role that our own communicative and educational practices play in circulating either narrow, exclusive sets of signs — texts — or broader, more inclusive texts. This means that we will learn to reflect upon the meanings that are attached to certain signs, the relationship between these meanings and attitudes towards difference, and the extent to which we can challenge narrow representations of normality — the mythical norm — by selecting in our own communication practices a broader, more inclusive range of signs.

It is only if we can achieve this breakthrough that we will be able to introduce consciously different kinds of stories, different views of the world, into our educational practices. At that moment, we will truly be on the pathway to transformative education.

## References and sources


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## Two common questions

***I appreciate all the steps in analysis, but aren't we sometimes just being really negative?***

One of the points that occasionally comes up when people start getting into any kind of textual analysis is the concern that things get taken 'too far'; that too much is read into 'harmless' texts, or that analysts run the risk of becoming paranoid. In some instances, I can see the point here; no one likes to feel that their every word is being scrutinised or possibly taken out of context.

However, the bigger point is that the textual analysis that I am suggesting in this chapter doesn't have *critique* as its primary goal. Instead, the critical dimension of the process is aimed at supporting the creation of positive and inclusive educational (and social) environments. We must look closely at existing practices to discover the extent to which they are going to help us achieve these inclusive

environments. This can be awkward, uncomfortable and often downright annoying, as it can require us to question some of the things that we may have been doing (or texts we may have been using) for years. But this, of course, is at the heart of the challenge.

Books such as this wouldn't exist if we lived in a world where all people were viewed as equal, given the same opportunities, and accorded the same respect. Having accepted that this isn't the case, it is necessary to accept also that working to change this will require effort on the part of every single one of us. Now we all know some people who will never change, and there is often very little we can do about that. But we also know others who work very hard to create the kinds of transformative environments that allow for differences to be identified and celebrated. It is with these people that we have the most in common. The key point here is that in order to work towards the positive process of creating new and transformative environments, it is necessary for us to go through the analytical (and occasionally negative) process of getting to know the environment we are dealing with. However, it is because the emphasis is always on moving towards positive, renewed practice that I have termed this analytical process *transformative analysis*. My hope is that this term will help us to remember that the ultimate goal is to generate better educational environments for all students, regardless of marks of difference.

***Transformative analysis seems to raise issues similar to those raised in critical-literacy workshops. Are these compatible approaches?***

The short answer is yes. In fact, the practices associated with transformative analysis are compatible with any approach that seeks to denaturalise taken-for-granted practices, to highlight the consequences of these practices for various individuals and groups, and to move beyond them. This means that teachers who routinely 'do' critical-literacy activities will have little difficulty picking up the kinds of points that I am making throughout this chapter. There are a couple of points, however, that need to be kept in mind.

In some versions, critical-literacy approaches fail to attend to all the issues associated with the *consequences* of particular texts. That is, they may well draw attention to how a text is put together, and the relationship between text and context, but they may not draw attention to the operation of power within the text or all the issues that are at stake within a text. This point has been made elsewhere by Rowan, Knobel, Bigum and Lankshear (2001:91), who write:

*... one increasingly common problem with critical literacy is that it often becomes an orthodoxy in classrooms and teachers fall into the trap of scheduling critical literacy for wet Friday afternoons when they can read 'feminist' picture books to students and critique traditional gender roles. More insidiously, perhaps, critical literacy often becomes divorced from its generative theories — critical theory, discourse analysis, cultural studies, philosophy — so that it comes to mean simply critiquing texts alone by means of a set list of criteria, rather than critiquing something in respect to relationships, discourse, social practices and structures of power... At worst, critical literacy is reduced to sets of 'tricks' to do with texts ...*

It is important to stay focused on what is at stake within a communication, and the world views that can be identified: what happens because of these views? How does this affect people? How can/should this be challenged? It is this kind of focus that transformative analysis takes as its organising principle. Transformative textual analysis focuses closely on what is represented as *natural* or *normal* within a text, and therefore always encourages the investigation of practices that may elsewhere appear normal.

The steps of analysis outlined throughout this chapter also help to ensure that issues associated with difference are recognised and responded to by those involved in the analysis. Critical literacy, like any other form of analysis, will only focus on those issues identified by a teacher or a class: the kinds of questions put forward in this book are designed to maximise the chance that students will focus explicitly on the eight paradigms of difference we have been referring to.

## Activity

Let's look now at a simple text and test out our understanding of how day-to-day acts of communication reflect attitudes towards difference. This is a transcript from an early-childhood classroom.

Teacher: *Okay, everyone quiet now, quiet now; you too, James. We need to clear some space here for our dancing and yes, boys, you* ***do*** *have to do it. Now, Peter, Jarred, who else is strong? Kyle, Kurt, can you shift these desks? Look at this mess; Kate, Dow, get a broom and clean up this rubbish like good girls for me.*

Let's just ask ourselves some simple questions about this text and the signs it uses to talk about gender differences.

- What words — signs — are associated with the boys?
- What words — signs — are associated with the girls?
- What assumptions about girls and boys underpin the ways in which they are represented?
- Is there a difference here? What do the boys get to do? What do the girls get to do?

If you take your time to work through these questions, you will notice that in this extract, as in so many others, boys are linked to activity, noise and strength, while girls are linked to cleaning. Boys are seen as 'anti-dance' and likely to argue, while girls are seen as compliant — there is no assumption that they will not be pleased. This extract therefore demonstrates a conformity to some mythical norms about gender. If our culture values strength, why can't girls be seen as strong? Why do boys have to be strong? Why do girls have to be cleaners? Why can't boys be good at cleaning?

This might seem like a small example, but it is not so much the size of the example as its *recurring* nature that is important. If messages such as these are repeated over and over, then sooner or later they come to appear natural. They end up shaping our behaviour, and the beliefs we have about ourselves and others.

# Chapter Four

## Pitfalls, perils and possibilities: Maximising transformative potential

Now that I have looked at the key characteristics of transformative textual analysis, it is time to extend some of the ideas embedded in the transformative model. But first, there are a few key points that are worth revisiting.

## Repetition

First, it is important to acknowledge that we are not talking at a purely literal level here. I am not suggesting that the big lesson we get from *Snow White*, for instance, is that princesses are generally passive while princes are generally heroic. The messages are more subtle and far-reaching. What we learn is that certain signs drawn from the paradigms of difference (p 13) are more likely to be associated with all the romance, glamour, intrigue and mystery of positive fairy-tale characters, while others are more likely to be associated with the villains.

If *Snow White* were an isolated case, then clearly it wouldn't matter so much. However, the fairy tale is a powerful genre, and it repeats these patterns of positive and negative representation over and over again. Even more significantly, these patterns are repeated across a wide range of genres so that the association between beauty and goodness (and the parallel association between evil and ugliness) ultimately

appears natural. Think about some of the science-fiction movies that have succeeded in Australia. From *Star Trek* through to *Star Wars*, from *Flash Gordon* to *Alien* to *Independence Day*, the good guys and bad guys (and I use the term 'guy' here deliberately) are bound together by similar physical characteristics — with the assorted aliens being represented in varying degrees of ugliness, and the assorted heroes (and occasional heroines) conforming most commonly to the same white, able-bodied, physically attractive stereotypes that we identified throughout *Snow White*. While some of the movies might challenge the genre codes slightly (by dressing the storm troopers in white, for example, or having African-American characters in heroic roles), the general patterns continue to position particular types of characters as heroes and other types of characters as villains.

This reminds us that it is not just isolated texts that are the problem. The problem is that the patterns associated with the representation of differences are repeated across an extraordinarily wide range of texts. This, of course, is how the associations they make come to appear as natural.

The reason that fairy tales and margarine advertisements and adventure movies and video games and Barbie dolls and comic books continually represent heroes and heroines in similarly limited ways is that each of these textual genres are interconnected through a web of culturally produced associations. They reinforce each other as they use and naturalise similar and related communication patterns. Most specifically, they reproduce and naturalise patterns of inclusion and exclusion around various paradigms of difference.

# A key skill

The end result is that out of the various paradigms of difference, a distinction is drawn between who is *included* and who is *excluded*. One of the key skills associated with the construction of educational environments where difference is valued, therefore, is the ability to identify textual practices where differences are either included or excluded. This is a vital skill, and one that needs to be celebrated. However! Other skills need to go alongside this basic one.

If we focus only on the distinction between inclusion and exclusion, it might seem that all we need to do is ensure that there are equal numbers of women and men, for example, portrayed in our classroom resources, or that people with disabilities or people from non-English-speaking backgrounds, or members of diverse religions, are included in our day-to-day communication practices. Clearly it is more complex than that. If we refer back to Snow White and her handsome prince, for example, we can argue that this is an example of a text including one central male and one central female. By these numerical criteria alone, it might seem that this text is inclusive of difference! Clearly, though, there is more to be considered than the simple issue of inclusion. In this chapter, therefore, I am going to work through three key sets of

distinctions which help us to build up a more detailed understanding of the diverse ways in which texts communicate about difference.

I will be looking specifically at the difference between:

- positive inclusion and negative inclusion
- stereotyping and diversity
- tokenism and centrality.

As I work through each of these examples, I will illustrate the difference between those texts which *value* difference and those which *devalue* it. I will refer to a range of cultural texts to illustrate each of these distinctions.

# Positive inclusion and negative inclusion

This distinction was covered implicitly in the previous chapter. It involves identifying not only who is included, but *how* they are included. Consider, for example, the characters in *101 Dalmatians*. It is possible to identify at least two central women who play key roles in this text. It is *not* possible to argue, however, that they are represented in the same way. I'm sure you can complete the analysis here!

In addition to instances of negative inclusion that show characters to be overtly evil or nasty, there are other, slightly more subtle ways in which characters can be represented negatively. To identify these ways, we need to ask what particular skills would generally be valued within the text's various locations. In the *Mighty Ducks* movies, for instance, a lot of the action takes place within junior ice-hockey competitions, among teenage friendship groups, and in families. Each of these contexts has behaviours that are valued. Within the ice-hockey environment, for instance, skills such as speed, courage, accuracy, team play and so on are generally represented positively (at least within G-rated versions of hockey stories!).

To identify how well the *Mighty Ducks* movies deal with difference, then, it is necessary to see not only who is included (and there *is* a mixture of girls and boys, as well as a mixture of physical appearances and cultural backgrounds), but who gets to *display* these valued skills. Significantly, throughout the *Mighty Ducks* movies, most of the players have moments where they take up the heroic role. This makes it possible to argue that these texts not only include differences, but that they also represent them positively, in the sense that they allow all the characters access to the same culturally valued skills.

Think about a text you have looked at recently (a book, a movie, whatever you like). Can you think of an instance where a particular character who you might not

ordinarily see within that kind of text (such as a woman in a sporting movie, or an Indigenous Australian in a comedy) is included but then shown to be in some way inadequate — stupid, silly, or the cause of trouble?

The point here is that inclusion is only part of the battle. One of the biggest pitfalls associated with transformative practice is the tendency to believe that just because some mark of difference has been added in, everything is therefore hunky-dory. All too often, inclusion functions at the 'stunt equity' level I spoke about in chapter one: it might look good to those having a superficial glance, but it contributes little to the kind of *cultural* shift that is necessary to effect sustainable change.

In the following sections, I am going to look in more detail at two ways in which inclusion can work *against* the ultimate aim of this book: to identify, include, value and celebrate cultural diversity in all its forms. Those ways are stereotyping and tokenism.

Let's start by distinguishing between stereotyping and diversity.

# Stereotyping and diversity

One of the most common ways of dealing with characters from paradigms of difference is in the form of a stereotype. A stereotype, in this context, is a simplistic representation of a person or group of people which also implies a value judgement about those people. Stereotypes are extremely common within Western culture. We have stereotypes about mothers-in-law, about people who live in the country, about football players, and so on. When we consider issues of difference, we need to be extremely aware of how often moments of inclusion descend into stereotyping.

Let's consider some examples. From the broad paradigm of cultural background, we can identify Australians who have vastly different heritages. Throughout the country there are Australians whose families are descended from people in countries such as Japan, China, India, Greece, Italy, the United Kingdom, Poland, Lebanon, Vietnam, Mexico and so on. (You may well identify with one of these backgrounds yourself.) If we study the texts that make up our classroom resources, we will generally find it much easier to find representations of white Australians — particularly those who appear to have ties to the UK — than it is to find representations of the vast range of cultural groups identified above. When these groups are included, however, it is often in fairly simple, one-dimensional and stereotypical ways.

Let's take some examples. Think about advertising on Australian TV. How many examples of an Indian person can you remember? Or a Mexican? Or someone from China? Of those you *can* recall, how are they portrayed? Some of the examples that stand out in my mind relate to advertisements for various fast-food products such as KFC, Hungry Jack's or McDonald's. Many of these companies have regular 'special' and 'themed' meal deals which offer Mexican-style burgers or Asian-style chicken. When this happens, the image is often accompanied by the stereotypes associated with the

particular country/region. So ads for Mexican pizzas are accompanied by pictures of Mexicans in sombreros, cactuses, deserts and so on. The fact that this image bears little relationship to the realities of Mexican culture is generally overlooked. 'Asian' culture is sometimes represented by an aggregation of images that belong to entirely different cultural groups.

Similarly, the only examples of advertisements including people from India that I can think of are those for curry powder, pappadums or tea, as well as one particularly jarring advertisement for washing-machines in which the people 'over there' are depicted as being less sophisticated than 'us' because they wash their clothes on rocks and, even when presented with a 'hard-working' washing-machine, are so baffled by what to do with it that they can only use it as another kind of rock against which to bash their clothes. Once again, there is no indication that Indian people are as diverse as any other group of people.

In other words, people who don't match up to a particular cultural norm — whether that norm relates to gender, cultural background, physical appearance or whatever — are often included in mainstream or popular texts only in stereotypical ways. This is also well illustrated by the ways in which Indigenous Australians are portrayed in popular culture. There are two common sets of stereotypes about indigenous people: the first set (generally positive) portrays them in 'traditional' ways — in traditional locations, in a traditional relationship with the land, displaying traditional skills in art, bushcraft and so on. The second set (generally negative) portrays them as lazy, criminally minded etc. There is an important point to be made here. I do not advocate dishonest censorship, nor am I denying that it may be a good thing to include positive representations of Australians living in quite traditional remote communities. However, these are not the only lifestyle choices made by our indigenous population. Not every Aboriginal person lives in the bush, any more than every Aboriginal person plays the didgeridoo. In other words, stereotypes — whether they appear to be positive or negative — can always be dangerous if they reduce a complex group of people to a homogeneous mass.

Think back on the images of Indigenous Australians that you have access to in your classroom. How many of these images are there? How many of them are consistent with the traditional stereotypes? How many show Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island people in non-traditional roles?

While there are bound to be some exceptions, I'd put money on the fact that most classrooms have few images of Indigenous Australians at the best of times, and that most of those which are included emphasise such things as the Dreaming, traditional customs, and so on. Let me repeat what I said above: *there is nothing automatically wrong with these images*. On the contrary, what is wrong is the fact that other, equally valid, images are left out. Many indigenous people live and work in cities. There are Aboriginal teachers, lawyers, nurses, mechanics and so on. And every one of these people has probably had to overcome the reactions of others who associate them with the traditional images of indigenous people first and foremost, and who therefore have trouble accepting them in these seemingly non-traditional roles.

So, there is more to inclusion than working to ensure that we acknowledge a range of people from a paradigm such as cultural background. We also need to try and resist the tendency to slip into the repetition of stereotypes about these people (or ourselves), and to emphasise, instead, issues of diversity by highlighting the differences among, within and between members of particular groups.

You might take this point more clearly if you think of characters in books, movies or TV shows who are indigenous, and those who are not. Without thinking too much at all, I could come up with a list of 200 different kinds of TV roles played by European Australians. I would have trouble coming up with many more than two kinds of roles played by Indigenous Australians. This helps to perpetuate stereotypes and to generate the idea that there is much more diversity within one section of the population than the other.

So, even when wide-ranging character sets *are* included texts, we have seen that it is important to distinguish between those who are represented stereotypically and those who are associated with their diversity. A similarly important distinction can be made between those characters given central roles and those given token roles. Let's talk about that in more detail now.

# Tokenism and centrality

If you've ever been the only member of a particular group (such as the only woman, the only first-year teacher, or the only music teacher) included in a discussion or policy-making group that is trying to be inclusive, you may well have experienced the feeling of being a token inclusion. Tokenism, in other words, is an attempt at inclusion that stops short of integrating or normalising the individual or group who has been 'added in'.

A token inclusion is one which looks good on the surface but has little in the way of substance. It is nice to say, for instance, "Oh yes, I have books on people with disabilities in my classroom". It is another thing altogether if the books are seldom given any attention. Think about some of your favourite resources: can you recall any characters from the various paradigms of difference who are included but given only a very minor, or token role? If we go back to the fairy-tale genre, it would be possible to argue that older people are given token roles in these books: they usually appear for only two or three lines, then disappear (often by dying). So while they might technically be *there*, they seldom play any crucial part in the narrative.

Similarly, television sitcoms offer many examples of token characters. During the nineties, it became very popular to have a token gay character (often one who was used as a source of humour, and who figured only in relation to their sexuality). Today, though, it is easier to find gay characters who are shown in central roles without overt reference being made, every second of every scene, to their sexual preferences.

Disabilities are regularly dealt with in similarly tokenistic ways; within the classic soap-opera plot, for instance, key characters are regularly 'struck down' or 'afflicted' with some kind of disability — blindness or paralysis, for instance — and are then miraculously cured by something such as 'true love'. This kind of plot line not only represents the disability itself as either a punishment or a tragedy, it shows that characters who are good, true or loyal will ultimately be 'rewarded' by having their affliction removed. This kind of portrayal has lessened slightly over recent years, and an increasing number of texts deal with issues of intellectual and physical disability in insightful ways. Although aimed at mature audiences, *The Bone Collector* and *The Other Sister* are two very different but very effective examples of how characters who have disabilities can be portrayed outside of the stereotypes and tokenistic attitudes that so often surround them. TV shows such as *ER*, *Becker* and even *Malcolm in the Middle* also do a good job of including characters with some disability. Nevertheless, tokenistic inclusions of disabled characters are still pretty common, and still very unhelpful for broadening cultural appreciation of people with various disabilities.

Tokenism, therefore, is a classic way of devaluing characters from various paradigms of difference. Token characters are generally not given a chance to participate, in any meaningful way, in the story line being forwarded. They are given minor roles, are seldom portrayed as the people who solve or resolve any challenges, and are regularly denied any of the rewards that come from being a central character.

# When tokenism meets stereotyping

I should also say that tokenism and stereotyping often go hand in hand. There are many instances in which one female character is included among a bunch of male characters, then proceeds to act in stereotypically feminine ways. Lady Smurf is a classic example. You will no doubt be able to think of others.

In fact, one of the most common instances of tokenism meeting stereotyping is provided by a widespread phenomenon in primary schools today: multicultural weeks. I am sure that some schools deal with these occasions very well, with all due sensitivity to issues of diversity and centrality. In many instances, however, these kinds of events work both to circulate stereotypes and to perpetuate token inclusions. These celebrations can foster stereotyping if they make use of only narrow images of particular countries. This can happen when teachers select books that work deliberately to tell simple and simplified stories about one aspect of a nation's people. If they stand alone, these books can portray a very narrow version of a country's culture.

To give another example, students may be encouraged to purchase 'themed' food from a tuckshop — food which often reflects stereotypical images of people's preferences. (I know of one school where a meal of tacos and chocolate is portrayed as 'real' Mexican fare.) There is nothing automatically wrong or inaccurate about these kinds of portrayals. But if they stand alone in students' experiences as the image of

the particular country, they do little to represent the rich and diverse nature of that country. This, of course, is where the tokenism question arises. If multicultural week is the only time that a school focuses its attention on countries other than Australia, and if the images of those countries are narrow and limiting, then little is being done to identify, acknowledge or celebrate cultural diversity. Even worse, these kinds of public celebrations can create the illusion that a school community is 'on top of' issues of difference when in fact it deals with these issues in possibly counterproductive ways.

What I have been trying to highlight to this point is that to become aware of the way all kinds of texts (and textual environments) deal with difference, we must look critically at a whole range of things that we do in our day-to-day practices. This requires us to do more than take a surface look at what's going on (appearances can indeed be deceptive). Instead, we need to get into the habit of always asking tough questions about how differences are included, represented or valued.

## So what *do* we want?

Now, I'm conscious that by the time you've read to this point, you may well be thinking: "Good grief, is there *anything* that will make this woman happy?". Believe me, I have had this reaction myself! And yes, in answer to the question I have often been asked by harassed-looking teacher-education students, there *are* plenty of texts that support the goal of this book. Let me remind you of what that goal is.

I am proceeding from the belief that all of the different people in our society — people of diverse ages, religious affiliations, cultural backgrounds, appearances, abilities, economic circumstances, genders and sexualities — have a right to expect the same kind of respect as anyone else. This means that they are entitled to be included within day-to-day life and to be treated positively and sensitively. This, in turn, means that they are entitled to be represented as individuals and not merely as stereotypes; that they have a right to expect 'equal time' and not merely the occasional passing reference; and that they have the right to the same kinds of rewards and opportunities as other people.

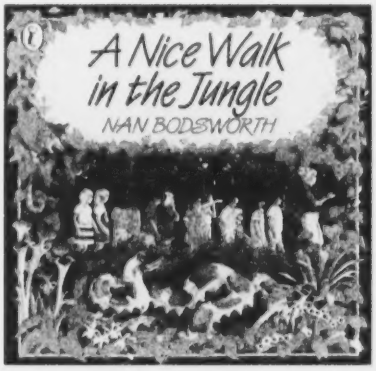
This means that the kinds of textual practices that I *personally* would celebrate have the following characteristics.

- They include people from a range of paradigms of difference.
- They resist the stereotyping of individuals within these paradigms.
- They give diverse characters central and valued roles.

This is perhaps best illustrated via a quick example.

# Walking in the jungle ...

One of my favourite picture books ever is *A Nice Walk in the Jungle* by Nan Bodsworth (1989). As many of you will know, this book has a simple story line involving a teacher leading her class on a walk through a jungle for Nature Study Day. As the students walk along, following the teacher, they are progressively swallowed up by a boa constrictor. Happily, at the end of the story the students are removed from the snake and return safely home. The most interesting part of the story for my purposes is, of course, how it deals with paradigms of difference. This requires us to think about the steps in analysis that I've been talking about (p 47).




*Inclusion occurs naturally within the narrative of* A Nice Walk in the Jungle. *Source:* A Nice Walk in the Jungle. *Copyright © Nan Bodsworth, 1989. Published by Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Melbourne.*

As I work through these steps, I'll modify them slightly to illustrate how they can be customised to suit the analytical needs of a particular text.

*Who is included?* This text incorporates the traditional female teacher but also a range of students from diverse cultural backgrounds and with different physical abilities. There are boys and girls from various backgrounds, including at least five who, from the illustrations, could be from Asian or African backgrounds. There is a student with glasses and one student in a wheelchair. This isn't a bad result for a book that features only 12 students in all. While there are obviously many other individuals excluded, this picture book does an extremely good job of including diverse student types.

*What are various individuals associated with? Who gets to do what?* As mentioned earlier, this simple story line has all of the students undertaking the same activity — following their teacher through the jungle. All of them are therefore shown encountering the various animals and plants, and all of them are shown being swallowed by the boa constrictor. In some books, the author might have been tempted to have one particular student — generally a brave young boy — rescue all his classmates. This book treats each student in the same fashion. Admittedly, it is one boy, Tim, who tries to point out the hungry boa constrictor to the teacher, but he, too, is ultimately

swallowed up. It is left to Miss Jellaby to rescue them all, which she does by punching the boa constrictor on the nose and shaking it until all the kids come out.

*What is represented as natural and normal?* It is possible to see that the full range of behaviours and experiences included in the book — ranging from obedience to the teacher, an interest in wildlife, friendship, right through to courage in the face of a boa constrictor and the ability to survive such an attack — are associated with the full range of students. No student is singled out as uniquely heroic or resourceful, nor as noticeably frail or foolish. In other words, the diversity of the group is accepted as natural, not as something that requires particular attention.

*Who/What is valued?* Therefore, it is possible to say that all of the students are valued equally. They all face the same experience, all suffer the same fate, and all enjoy the same rescue and rewards. They are all, therefore, valued equally.

Because of this, it is possible to argue that the text *challenges* mythical norms associated with many paradigms of difference. The girls are shown to be as active and resourceful as the boys. The people of colour are shown to be as tasty to eat as those with white skin. People with disabilities are shown to be as suited to adventure in the jungle as anyone else. In other words, many of the common stereotypes associated with physical ability, gender and cultural background are challenged by this text.

This is pretty significant, given that it is actually a very short book! So the moral of both this story and this chapter is that, yes, it *is* possible for ordinary, everyday texts to work transformatively, and to include and value difference.

There is one final point I'd like to make before summarising all that we've covered. This relates to the fate of those texts that might not seem to be all that transformative.

# Where does this leave Snow White?

Two of the most common concerns expressed by people when they start to look for transformative texts are that, firstly, there are very few existing texts that seem to deal with all paradigms of difference positively and, secondly, that they really love some of the less-inclusive, non-transformative texts and don't want to give them up. These are both important points.

To take the second issue first: I am not suggesting that it is necessary to rid our classrooms of fairy tales, traditional stories or every other resource that doesn't include a positive representation from every paradigm of difference. This would be a ridiculous position. As I have argued earlier, the patterns relating to difference that can be seen in one text are only made natural or normal if they recur in other texts. So it is not necessarily a problem to include *Snow White* and *Spot* and other texts which

feature only a narrow range of characters *if the students are also given regular access to other kinds of texts with other kinds of characters*. It is the repetition of images that makes them natural, so if students watch transformative fairy tales like *Shrek* alongside traditional tales such as *Beauty and the Beast*, they are less likely to buy into traditional ideas (such as the one that argues that the heroes/heroines always end up beautiful even if they start out as beasts ...).

Of course, there *are* some traditional texts which I find to be less than desirable in classrooms. I have little tolerance for books that are based almost exclusively on stereotypes and make no attempt whatsoever to challenge the white, middle-class, European, able-bodied, physically attractive mythical norm that we have critiqued to this point. Even movies like Disney's *Tarzan* make my skin crawl, thanks to the extraordinarily traditional gender roles taken up by the male and female gorillas.

This, though, will always be a matter of individual taste, and only individual teachers can decide where they will draw their line about what is likely to help them achieve the overall goal of including and valuing difference.

In doing so, teachers will also make decisions about the resources they wish to keep in their classroom and those they wish to replace. This can be a challenge, because we all know that schools are generally on limited budgets and don't always have the freedom of going to the book shop or the video store and picking out the latest transformative texts. I also need to be honest here and say that even if we do have this freedom, there isn't always a lot to choose from. We have certainly come a long way in terms of producing texts that include, give central places to, and recognise and celebrate the diversity of various paradigms of difference. But we are a long way from having these transformative texts for sale at supermarket checkouts.

For this reason, one of the most important things that teachers need to do is to establish their own sets of resources by grabbing them whenever and wherever they can find them. This can mean being alert to the materials that come to hand via newspapers, magazines, brochures and movies, as well as the traditional kinds of picture books and classroom materials. A related skill here is that of drawing on our professional networks, and the opportunities we have to trade resources, good ideas and materials. This is something teachers are well known for, and it is crucial when we are aiming to deal with difference. All too frequently, a teacher who has good intentions about including a range of images of difference will find their efforts thwarted when they can find only two books that deal with, for example, Australians at the war, and both of them make no reference to women in the armed forces, or the role of indigenous Australians, for instance.

# A continuing project

Taking on board all of the issues explored in this and previous chapters, then, it is possible to argue that working within a transformative framework requires more than a casual or passing commitment to equity, justice or 'doing the right thing'. Cultural transformation and the re-invention of cultural norms is a project that requires continual work, as well as a willingness to reflect upon progress. There is one final point I need to make here: it is possible to become so obsessed with critique that we forget to identify those moments within texts, within our educational environments, and within the world around us, when stereotypes or mythical norms are challenged. Every single one of those moments is worth celebrating and, frankly, I don't think it matters one little bit whether or not the particular instance appears to have earth-shattering consequences. In fact, I believe that it is the small acts of transformation that will ultimately lead to the creation of new ways of understanding and representing the diversity we are all part of.

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## A common question

***I like working with transformative texts, and certainly make use of a range of them in my classroom, but I worry that I'm not using enough. How much is enough?***

There is no easy answer to this. All teachers have to set their own goals when it comes to dealing with difference. While it is important to get beyond one-off or occasional inclusions of difference, there is no magic number of texts which will guarantee a transformative classroom! And, of course, all the transformative texts in the world will make no difference at all if they aren't accompanied by classroom practices that encourage students to value those texts.

So what I'm saying here is that it is less the quantity and more the quality of what we do with texts that is important. If students are exposed to, say, four or five non-traditional representations in the course of a term, and if their teacher works to ensure that they have the vocabulary to be able to interpret those texts in positive, non-stereotypical ways, then I believe this is a truly significant outcome.

# Chapter Five

## Transformative tracks: New ways of dealing with difference

We've now looked at the ways in which the skills of transformative analysis can help us to uncover the various ways in which difference is dealt with by individual texts. We've investigated the ways in which difference is *routinely* dealt with (that is, by exclusion), as well as some of the more subtle ways in which differences can be devalued through tokenistic or stereotypical representations, or via various forms of negative inclusion.

Throughout this book, I have argued that the ways of dealing with difference that we saw in chapter 4 are significant not just because some texts exclude or devalue certain human attributes, but because these responses are repeated so *regularly*, and thus have the potential to appear natural and normal.

The fact that some characteristics/people are regularly included in positively valued texts while others are routinely excluded (or included and then devalued in some way) has become rather invisible in Australian culture. We have to work hard at denaturalising the kinds of inclusions/exclusions that we come across so often. To appreciate how unusual it is to see something other than the mythical norm repeated in common genres like picture books or text books, think about the way people describe texts that *do* include a wider range of characters.

Let me give a specific example. When people describe the plot of books to each other, they might say things like: "It's about a bunch of kids who go to the zoo" or "It centres on a young girl who is bullied at school". In these descriptions, no attempt is made to define the cultural background, appearance or physical abilities of the characters; it is taken for granted that they will, of course, be white, able-bodied and attractive, as though this is just natural. But when the same people are describing different kinds of characters, they often add more information and say things like: "It's about an Aboriginal girl" or "There's a story about a girl — she's in a wheelchair — who catches a great big fish".*

* A similar phenomenon occurs with the authors of books. We may barely notice if the author has a European-sounding name, but we will generally notice and comment on those (few) published texts that bear a less familiar signature.

What is important here is that these characters are so often associated with their *difference*. This tells us that these differences are not yet taken for granted in Australian culture; they have not yet been normalised, and are still strange enough to be commented on. This same process can be seen whenever there is any challenge to a cultural norm. I remember the first time I saw a woman work as a goal umpire in a game of Australian Rules football at the national level. I commented myself on how unusual it was, and then noticed that almost every time she was in camera (and goal umpires get a fair amount of camera!), one of the commentators would refer to the "woman umpire" (not just the umpire), or to what a good job she was doing. In other words, her difference was something to be remarked on, because it didn't appear natural.

Now, some few years later, she doesn't draw any remarks at all from the commentators; her presence has been naturalised. Of course, given that she is still the only woman in this role in the national competition, it is possible to raise all those questions about tokenism that I referred to in the previous chapter. Nevertheless, the fact that she is now included, *and* associated with the same skills and abilities as the other umpires, *and* viewed as a natural part of the football game, is a big step forward. She is a living, breathing, flag-waving example of how traditional stories (such as those about football) can be challenged in such a way that new stories are created.

# Counternarratives

The potential for all of us to participate in the construction of new stories (or narratives) that move beyond traditional ways of dealing with difference is at the heart of this book. It would be depressing indeed to talk about traditional patterns of representing difference if there were no possibility for these patterns to be challenged! However, I am committed to the belief that every single one of us is able to make use of (and construct) texts that help to transform what is represented as normal within our everyday environments. In other words, every one us is able to participate in the process of constructing new stories about difference. These new stories can be defined as *transformative narratives* or *counternarratives*.

In this chapter, I want to spend more time examining some examples of transformative narratives. I will discuss the way some texts are relatively radical in what they set out to achieve, while others set more modest goals but are nevertheless extremely significant in constructing and circulating new ways of understanding various paradigms of difference. Before I get into specific examples, however, it is worthwhile to preview the kinds of characteristics that I'll be looking for — the characteristics that mark a transformative narrative.

# Characteristics of transformative texts

Not surprisingly, the characteristics of texts which I consider to be transformative are generally the opposite of those texts which I believe to be fairly traditional in how they deal with difference. Let's look at the characteristics in turn.

## Difference is included

First, transformative texts *include* signs of difference. This means that they will include someone in a text who does not match up to the mythical norm for that kind of text. These signs will be drawn from the paradigms of difference discussed throughout the book: age, gender, physical ability, cultural background, economic status, physical appearance, religion and sexuality. Every group of texts, or genre, has its own traditions about which signs are routinely included or excluded. In other words, every genre (whether it is a fairy tale, an action movie, a Nintendo game or an AFL match) has its own traditions relating to the various people who are included or excluded, and how these people are represented. We can look at these texts and discover patterns relating to gender, cultural background, physical ability and so on. Because we know about these patterns (intuitively or otherwise), we can identify when the patterns have been challenged via the inclusion of a character type who is *not* typical of the genre.*

* One particular variation on this inclusion occurs in texts which include only traditional character types but which draw attention to the exclusion of other characters in their narratives.

This challenge relates not just to *who* is included but also to *how* the characters are portrayed.

## Differences are portrayed positively

Let's give a specific example. One of the most popular fairy tales in Australia some years ago was *The Paper Bag Princess* (Munsch, 1989) (Fig. 5.1). This text was seen as challenging the traditions of the fairy tale, particularly those traditions relating to gender. The heroine is independent, brave, resourceful and ultimately responsible for rescuing a prince (not the other way around). She is then untroubled by the prince's rejection of her (a rejection based on her appearance and the paper bag she wears because all of her clothes have been destroyed by fire). When we compare these characteristics of a heroine against the characteristics displayed by the stereotypical fairy-tale heroine (Snow White, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Red Riding Hood etc.), we can see that this is, indeed, a transformative text.

*Figure 5.1: Texts like* The Paper Bag Princess *do not just challenge genre conventions, they enable characters who depart from traditional norms to be viewed positively.*
Source: The Paper Bag Princess *by Robert Munsch. Art by Michael Martchenko, © 1980. Reprinted by permission of Annick Press, Toronto, Canada.*

The second characteristic of a transformative text, then, is that it represents non-traditional characters in *positive* ways. Representing difference positively takes a number of forms.

### Individual characters are valued

First, the characters can be linked with the qualities and behaviours traditionally valued within the genre. In a kids' adventure movie, for example, the skills that are valued might be courage, quick-thinking resourcefulness, a sense of humour, physical strength and so on. A transformative text would associate these skills not with the traditional male characters but with female characters, such as the lead character in *Madeline*, or with characters other than the stereotypical European heroines, such as *Mulan* in the Disney movie.

## Characters challenge stereotypes

Transformative texts are also generally sensitive to the dangers of stereotyping. While movies such as *Tarzan*, *Aladdin* and *The Jungle Book* include characters from diverse countries, they generally conform to Western stereotypes about those countries. The images of Princess Jasmine in the Disney version of *Aladdin* are, all things considered, rather extraordinary, even for a kids' movie!

Texts such as *Mulan*, however, portray some of the diversity of a national culture. *Mulan* does not fall into the trap of representing all Chinese women as submissive, or all Chinese men as dominant and authoritarian. In other words, cultural diversity is represented as natural.

This is also illustrated well in Hollywood movies that feature Australia as a setting. These movies tend to represent the Australian character in very narrow ways: the accent is exaggerated; so, too, are so-called 'ocker' behaviours; there is an emphasis on the outback skills that we are supposedly all born with; and so on. You can probably think of lots of examples here. When movies about Australia are made in Australia, though, they generally include a wide range of character types, some of whom may match stereotypes and (many) others of whom will not. In other words, diversity is portrayed as natural.

## Characters are given central roles

The recognition of diversity is closely tied to another equally important characteristic of the transformative text. That is, characters associated with difference are not only included, they are given central roles. This is in contrast to the tendency towards tokenism that we referred to in the previous chapter. If I can refer to an adult genre for a moment: many action movies include conventional tough-guy heroes who are supported by an African-American sidekick (the *Die Hard* movies are a good example). This kind of character is generally included to provide light relief, or to act as a counterpoint to the larger-than-life hero, and seldom takes on any vital role in the heart of the action or solves any key problems. Some texts, however, challenge this stereotype by giving African-American characters central roles, and by providing them with access to the skills that are valued in the genre.

I have already mentioned a number of transformative texts in which characters who are not traditionally included (or characters who act in non-traditional ways) are given central roles. These texts include *Pocahontas*, *Mulan*, *Madeline*, *The Mighty Ducks*, *The Paper Bag Princess* and *A Nice Walk in the Jungle*. I will look at some other examples in what follows. In fact, in the next section I want to detail two particular texts which, I believe, valuably illustrate the ways in which transformative texts can work. Before doing so, it seems useful to summarise the key characteristics of transformative texts by building on the list that I introduced on page 68.

# Transformative texts: A quick summary

Transformative texts work to:

- challenge traditional representations of difference
- include characters from a range of paradigms of difference
- value these characters
- represent these characters in diverse (non-stereotypical) ways
- give these characters central roles
- portray difference as natural, desirable and normal within a particular genre and within society more generally.

When all of these items are taken together — and when we remember how broad the category of 'difference' is — this is a reasonably challenging list. As I stressed in the previous chapter, however, it is not necessary for a transformative text to address every single paradigm of difference and to challenge every single tradition associated with the way a particular genre deals with differences. Some texts obviously have more scope than others. Longer texts such as movies, novels or even catalogues can be seen to have a greater chance of representing difference than some of the shorter texts. Many transformative texts, however, deal with only one or two paradigms of difference and tell new stories about these particular paradigms. This makes them no less significant, and no less transformative, if we remember that the ultimate goal of transformative analysis is to get new stories about difference into repeated circulation so that these new stories can work to replace those narratives associated with mythical norms. With this point in mind, I am going to look at two examples of texts that work transformatively in different ways. I will begin by studying a Mother's Day catalogue, after which I will look at the popular Australian movie *Babe*.

# A picture paints a thousand words: A Mother's Day story

Let me recall the key steps in transformative analysis.

Select a text.

Identify the status of the text/genre.

Reflect on how the genre traditionally deals with difference.

Analyse the text by working through the following questions:

- Who/What is included?
- Who/What is excluded?
- What are various individuals associated with? Who gets to do what?
- What is represented as natural and normal?
- Who/What is valued? How is this communicated?
- How does the text reproduce or challenge mythical norms?

Let's tackle the first three steps. I have chosen a Mother's Day catalogue released by Target in 1998.

Opinions concerning the status of any 'junk mail' will naturally vary from house to house and person to person, but in Australia there is a pretty widespread belief that Mother's Day itself is a valued celebration. This may accord this particular text somewhat more respect than the average 'unthemed' advertising brochure. If we broaden the issue to think about the status of advertising texts generally, it might be fair to suggest that while they are seldom anyone's *favourite* genre, catalogues are nevertheless a common and widely accepted means of distributing information, and they certainly figure prominently in the marketing campaigns of most large stores.

Accepting that Mother's Day catalogues have reasonable status and significant readership, it is possible to reflect upon the way in which texts of this particular genre traditionally deal with difference. This requires us to think about the way 'mums' and 'motherhood' are represented. This doesn't take a lot of work! Most of us can call to mind pages and pages of advertisements apparently aimed at the 'typical' mother which actually feature a very narrow selection of women. These women are most commonly young (20s/30s), white, thin, physically attractive, able-bodied and (judging by the number of appliances they are surrounded with) financially secure.

These women are also portrayed in particular kinds of ways and associated with particular kinds of people/things, all of which tell us a story about the norms associated with motherhood in Australia. These catalogues generally feature an abundance of such things as nightgowns, dressing gowns, underwear, slippers, handkerchiefs, make-up, perfume, jewellery, household appliances (such as toasters, vacuum cleaners, coffee makers etc.), books, chocolates and, occasionally, plants and small-scale garden items. All of these items reinforce a particular and limiting view of motherhood; mothers are portrayed as women who are primarily interested in household products, beauty products and passive leisure gear. Mothers who don't, in fact, match up to this norm are routinely excluded.

In other words, this particular genre has a long tradition of portraying motherhood in a very narrow way. It is now interesting to consider the way in which one particular text can challenge this tradition.

The Mother's Day catalogue that I am analysing was slipped into my letterbox along with a bundle of others from similar kinds of chain stores. This catalogue, however, stood out immediately for reasons that I will identify as I go. As an opening point, I need to acknowledge that sales catalogues have particular agendas. Like any advertising text, this catalogue seeks to create points of connection between a potential consumer and a range of products. In the following reading of the catalogue, therefore, I am not in any way denying this sales agenda. Nevertheless, I believe it is significant that unlike many other texts within the broad advertising space, this catalogue appears to reflect the belief that the audience comprises diverse and non-stereotypical people who may be interested in the products. Let me illustrate the ways in which I believe this text is transformative despite its very traditional genre.

## Who/What is included?
## Who/What is excluded?

First, the text contains a wide range of women. There are women who are young, middle-aged and elderly (featured on the front cover); there are women who have white skin and women with dark skin (although the majority are white); there are women in a range of sizes; there are women with obvious disabilities.

Already, then, it is possible to see that this catalogue is a bit different from the norm. While it doesn't (and can't) include an image of every single 'kind' of mother in Australia, a wide variety of mothers *is* given space. The feeling that this catalogue challenges the norms of the genre is confirmed by attention to the next question.

## What are various individuals associated with? Who gets to do what?

These diverse types of women are associated with a variety of products and activities. The usual nightgowns, underwear and chocolates are given space, but so too are other items: those that might be associated with a woman who works and travels outside of the home (briefcases, luggage, suit jackets, answering machines, portafiles, travel guides and so on); items outside of the house (such as wheelbarrows, barbecues and golf accessories — items usually found in Father's Day catalogues!); objects associated with office work, such as cordless phones; and general leisure items such as CDs, books and videos.

Interestingly, there is also variety in terms of the women linked with these diverse environments. The woman in the wheelchair, for instance, isn't shown indoors reading, or lounging around in a new, fluffy cardigan. Instead, she is pictured outdoors in the act of gardening. Similarly, the women in suits are not just the stereotypical young executives but, rather, women of diverse ages and cultural backgrounds. This is an important aspect; it shows not only a challenging of the specific norms associated with motherhood, but also a rejection of some of the norms linked to physical ability, age and ethnicity.

## What is represented as natural and normal?

This text works ultimately to challenge some of the norms associated with motherhood, because it represents a diverse range of women in a diverse range of roles displaying a diverse range of skills. Because all of these women are included in a catalogue whose primary purpose is to market products, it is safe to assume that each of these women is regarded by the text's producers as a natural, normal and legitimate representative of motherhood.

## Who/What is valued? How is this communicated?

It is similarly possible to argue that all of the women in this catalogue are valued, for they are all shown in positive relationship with the various products. The women are not portrayed as unable to operate a mower, for instance, or puzzled by the intricacies of a pocket calculator. They are shown as competent and skilled, and (given their positioning in the catalogue) as the objects of love and affection.

## How does the text reproduce or challenge mythical norms?

With all this in mind, it is possible to argue that this text challenges mythical norms around motherhood in Australia. The diversity of women who are included, given central roles, shown to be diverse representatives of a group and represented positively work to represent motherhood as a *reality* rather than just a commercially mediated myth. The text is able to include diverse signs from a pretty wide range of paradigms of difference, and works, as a result, to challenge some cultural norms around cultural background, physical ability, physical appearance and gender.

For all of these reasons, I would argue that this humble little catalogue (which many of us will have thrown away before it was a few hours old) can be considered a transformative text. Before I go on to look at another example of a transformative text, I want to make a couple of comments about my decision to include an analysis of this particular genre in this book. I was initially reluctant to make use of the catalogue, not only because of its obviously commercial overtones but because it is clearly not one that every reader will be familiar with (nor will you be able to go into your local school library and look it up).

However, it is important to consider this kind of text, for three reasons. First, it reminds us that transformative texts can be found in a diverse range of genres. It is not only the prize-winning picture book that has the potential to help students to think differently about difference. Second, it makes the valuable point that kids and adults get messages about difference in a diverse range of texts, and many of these have far more power than the kinds of texts that are more commonly found in educational settings. Finally, there is tremendous potential for students themselves to construct texts in this kind of genre, and to reflect explicitly upon the ways in which their own experiences (whether it is their experiences of mums, dads, childhood or some other category) might differ from what is dished up in popular texts.

Okay, having considered one kind of transformative text — and one that deals with a relatively wide range of differences — I want to look now at another kind of transformative text which is also suitable for analysing with students: the Australian movie *Babe*.

# Pigs might cry: A farmer's story

*Babe* was an extremely successful release in 1995. It centres on the experiences of a young pig — Babe — who becomes a member of the Hoggett family farm after being won by Farmer Hoggett in a raffle. Babe faces several challenges throughout the movie: learning to cope with the loss of his mother and family when he is sold; learning to live on a farm with farm rules (including lots of rules enforced in a very traditional patriarchal fashion by the head of the animals, Rex); and learning to work as a sheep pig with his beloved master Farmer Hoggett — known to the animals as The Boss. There are several aspects of this movie that I could concentrate on, but my goal in this brief analysis is to show how a text can be traditional in some ways, but non-traditional and transformative in other ways. I am going to focus specifically on the character of Farmer Hoggett.

## The status of the text/genre

To begin, then, this text belongs to the popular kids' movie genre, and perhaps to a subcategory within that genre that includes talking animals: the (partly) animated movie. These kinds of texts are extremely popular (often with both kids and adults), as indicated by the amount of money they make in box-office takings and merchandising spin-offs such as books, lunchboxes, T-shirts, stuffed toys etc. It seems reasonable to suggest that this is a high-status genre.

## How texts of this genre traditionally deal with difference

It is probably sufficient for us to acknowledge that animated kids' movies tend to follow the same traditions as other mainstream movies. That is, there are generally more characters who are male than female; these characters are more likely than not to be able-bodied, white and physically attractive; and the characters tend to conform to fairly traditional roles, in that it is often the men who play the active, heroic roles (think of *Toy Story*, *Small Soldiers* and *Antz*). It is important to acknowledge here that even though many of the central characters in these movies are often not humans (with animals and various toys or robots featuring prominently), they are nevertheless associated with human attributes via their gendering and the other roles they play. There is no doubt, for instance, that Woody and Buzz Lightyear from *Toy Story* play out pretty traditional white, masculine roles. With this in mind, it is possible to argue that the animated movie genre generally deals with difference in fairly limiting ways.

This brings us to *Babe*. What I want to focus on in the next few questions is not the movie as a whole, but the particular character of Farmer Hoggett. I will, however, address each of the key steps in transformative analysis along the way.

## Who/What is included?

In common with other texts in this genre, *Babe* features a relatively large cast. The central human characters are Farmer Hoggett and his wife, who are accompanied by a range of more incidental humans including sheepdog officials, neighbours, a vet, friends of the wife, the couple's children and so on. All of the human characters are white and able-bodied, although there is reasonable variety in terms of age and physical appearance.

Slightly more variety is found among the animals. The farmyard cast includes not only Babe, the young (presumably male) pig, but Rex and Fly (two sheepdogs), sundry sheep, a cat, a horse, a duck and various others. Most of these animals are attractive examples of their breed, but they do vary somewhat across age (particularly apparent among the sheep), physical ability (Rex, for instance, is shown late in the movie to possess a hearing impairment) and gender.

Farmer Hoggett, on whom I am focusing, is himself white, middle-aged, able-bodied and financially secure (if not exactly wealthy).

## Who/What is excluded?

Bearing in mind what I have already identified, it is fair to argue that the text excludes any overt signs of cultural diversity and physical disability. In this way, it is consistent with many other texts in this genre.

I'd like to argue, however, that in relation to the character of Farmer Hoggett, the text works fairly transformatively. To make this point, I'll focus primarily on Hoggett while addressing the next four questions.

## What are various individuals associated with? Who gets to do what?

In many ways, Hoggett is a stereotypical farmer. He undertakes all the typical farming duties associated with raising sheep for wool, including rounding up the sheep, scaring off wild dogs, repairing fences/gates, caring for animals and so on.

He is also shown in a stereotypically stoic manner: he doesn't talk much, seldom expresses any significant emotion, and appears to confide very little in his wife or friends. However, despite appearing to fit nicely into the stereotype of stoic male farmer, he is also shown to depart from this tradition. He forms a close relationship with the young pig, Babe, and is able to save the pig from being the family dinner! He is also portrayed as a rather eccentric inventor which, while a traditional male activity, is a pastime not generally seen as compatible with the practical dimension of farming.

And I am particularly interested in one of the penultimate scenes, when the farmer tries to convince Babe to eat and drink.

This is a key scene in the movie. Babe, having idolised The Boss and worked hard to gain his respect as a sheep pig, is devastated when he discovers (courtesy of the nasty cat) that Hoggett, like other humans, actually *eats* pigs — and that this is the only purpose many pigs have on a farm. He runs away from home, gets caught in the rain and, when finally tracked down by Rex and The Boss, languishes in the house, refusing to eat and drink.

Hoggett becomes increasingly concerned about the pig's welfare. While Rex, the dog, remonstrates with the pig in an attempt to force him to pull himself together, Hoggett takes an entirely different approach. First, he fills a bottle with water, then nurses the pig while he tries to give him the bottle. He then he starts to sing to the pig before, finally, he dances a rather frenetic and decidedly 'unmasculine' (according to stereotypes) jig around the room.

The song Hoggett sings has the following, rather poignant, lyrics:

> *If I had words*
> *to make a day for you*
> *I'd sing you a morning*
> *golden and true*
> *I would make this day*
> *last for all time*
> *then fill the night*
> *deep in moonshine.*

This is a turning point for Babe, who recovers, starts to eat and drink, and is well enough to compete in the sheepdog trials and ultimately win. In this sequence, the masculine character of Hoggett is shown to take on characteristics that are conventionally linked to the feminine: he is sensitive, nurturing, responsible for health care, and obviously capable of expressing intense emotion.

Even more importantly, this activity (while the cause of some amusement for the other farm animals who watch through the windows) is *valued* in the narrative. It achieves the desired result of curing Babe, and allows both Babe and Hoggett to share in the glory of a successful sheep dog/pig competition. This leads to the next two questions.

## What is represented as natural and normal? Who/What is valued, and how is this communicated?

It is possible to argue that in this particular aspect of the movie, Hoggett's combination of traditionally masculine *and* traditionally feminine behaviours is shown as natural and valued. The fact that Hoggett's general behaviour could easily be read as suspect is communicated by his wife's dismay when she discovers that her husband has entered the pig in a sheepdog competition. However, her dismay (largely tied to fear that he will be ridiculed) turns to pride when he emerges victorious. This narrative twist allows the viewers to witness a significant shift — a shift which sees a farmer accepted for his difference as well as for his sameness.

*Figure 5.3: The conventional attributes of masculinity (and the farmer) are challenged as* Babe *unfolds. While adopting many of the conventions of its genre,* Babe *enables viewers to value the qualities of tenderness and nurture exhibited by Farmer Hoggett.*
*Source:* Babe. *Reproduced with the permission of Universal Pictures. Copyright © 2001 by Universal Studios. Courtesy of Universal Studios Publishing Rights, a division of Universal Studios Licensing, Inc. All rights reserved.*

That we, the audience, are also meant to support Hoggett is clearly signified by the tumultuous applause that greets him and Babe after they finish the sheepdog trials with a perfect score. It is an astonishing performance that wins approval from everyone, and allows the audience to recognise the fact that this rather non-traditional character is, in the end, a hero.

This brings me to the final question.

## How does the text reproduce or challenge mythical norms?

In many respects, this is a traditional kind of text. The animals are ruled by the male sheepdog Rex, who for most of the movie plays a very authoritarian and 'tough' role; the farmer's wife appears to conform with many stereotypes of this role (being plump, gossipy, excited by cake stalls and jam competitions), and most of the other animals also conform to gender norms: the cat is female and spiteful; the duck is male and quirky; one sheep with a central role is Ma, a sheep who definitely has a matronly attitude; and the female sheepdog, Fly, plays a traditionally nurturing role with Babe.

In a range of ways, however, these norms are challenged throughout the movie. This is particularly evident in the case of Farmer Hoggett, who emerges as a complex character who challenges a great many of the stereotypes associated with men generally and farmers specifically. It's true that he is white, able-bodied and financially secure. But he nevertheless is shown to depart in significant ways from the norms of rural masculinity.

This is a very important point: not every text in the world will deal transformatively with every dimension of difference. It is, however, possible for individual texts to challenge particular dimensions of a mythical norm. When these texts appear in popular culture, they work collectively to challenge the power of representations that appear natural only because they are repeated so often. In other words, while they may not be *radically* transformative, they help to circulate new, non-traditional stories about some aspects of difference. For this reason, they are valuable resources that deserve to be incorporated into our educational kitbags.

# Some final comments

I believe that the texts I have considered in this chapter are transformative, because they meet the criteria I outlined earlier (p 80).

I am not arguing, of course, that texts like *Babe* can change the world on their own. Nor am I even suggesting that they can dramatically alter little parts of the world! However, I *do* believe that they have the power to help our students to think differently about various aspects of life. In turn, students may be able to identify some of the ways in which they themselves might contest some of the behaviours so commonly represented as normal. *Babe* is a particularly helpful example because it is a text that children identify with, enjoy, and often watch repeatedly.

For us to tap into the power of texts such as this, we need to be willing to bring them into our educational environments. This means resisting the urge to shut popular culture out of classrooms and embracing, instead, any text that will help us achieve our objectives associated with difference. Some people will find this difficult to

accept. I have often been told that it is inappropriate for teachers to use popular-culture materials in educational settings. As far as I am concerned, however, I'll use almost *any* kind of resource if it helps me achieve the overall goal of enabling students to recognise and value the diversity that characterises their world. So whether it's a piece of junk mail, an award-winning novel, a blockbuster film or a cereal box, a text will be welcome in my life if it deals with some aspect of difference in a transformative fashion.

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## A common question

***I can see that texts like* Babe *might have some transformative potential, but how can I justify using these kinds of resources in my classroom, and where am I supposed to find the time to fit them into an already crowded curriculum?***

The challenges associated with the crowded curriculum are significant. My own belief, though, is that we have a much greater chance of engaging the hearts and minds of students if we use texts and resources that they are already interested in. Some of the best teaching activities are those where the teacher makes use of the students' own resources or existing interests to make a broader point. Sometimes this will mean sacrificing adherence to a 'traditional' school curriculum. Sometimes it will mean setting aside chunks of time over several weeks. This can appear daunting, but teachers are a creative lot, and more than capable of finding ways to maximise the learning outcomes associated with a particular text. There is more than one lesson that could be organised around *Babe*, for instance. Indeed, the film illustrates everything from mathematics to technology, primary production, geography, weather/climate and political systems. This is in addition to its potential for opening up discussions around paradigms of difference. Other texts might get the mathematical or agricultural point across, but will they challenge students to think differently about families, men and nurturing?

Clearly, we need to consider what a transformative text can offer the classroom as a whole before we decide to make use of it. But we also need to consider what our alternatives might be: what will happen if we *don't* use these texts?

# Chapter Six

## Towards transformative classrooms

We've now explored the various ways in which the vast range of differences associated with paradigms such as age, gender, cultural background, physical appearance, physical ability, religion and socio-economic status can be either valued or devalued by particular kinds of texts. We've explored the difference between conventional texts — which tend to reproduce narrow, exclusive representations of groups of people — and transformative texts, which seek to include and value a more diverse range of people and attributes.

We saw how transformative texts deal with difference in the last chapter (pp 77–80). My goal is to work towards educational environments where these principles operate on a day-to-day basis. In other words, in this chapter I want to build upon what we've explored to show how the skills of transformative analysis can be used to support the design of our own classroom activities.

Teachers can move into this space in several ways. Throughout this chapter, I'll provide some examples of ways in which the principles that underlie transformative practice can be turned into in-class activities. You will no doubt think of plenty of others as we go along; in fact, many of your favourite activities can probably be adapted to meet the goals being discussed.

# Develop a vision

When it comes to tackling the challenges associated with difference and diversity in educational settings, the one thing that teachers really need is a sense of the 'big picture'. This is important for a number of reasons. First, the kinds of traditions that support conventional representations of difference are generally very long-standing and very powerful. People in Australian society have lived for a long time with relatively narrow and prescriptive images of what is natural or normal for particular individuals and groups. We may, as a result, hold deeply entrenched attitudes about women and men; about immigrants and Indigenous Australians; about the rich and not-so-rich; about beauty and glamour and popularity. All of these long-standing beliefs affect what goes on in schools. Students come into classrooms not as the blank slates they were once imagined to be, but as bundles of complex beliefs, each one of which will be tested out or reinforced during their educational experience.

It is important to be aware of the interconnection between cultural beliefs and schooling, because some attitudes are very difficult to shift. For this reason, it is vital that those working towards the construction of transformative texts keep the overall transformative agenda in mind. If you expect to change the world in the course of an 11-week school term, be prepared for disillusionment and (sometimes) exhaustion and inactivity.

This doesn't mean that change can't happen overnight, or that individual teachers can't make a difference. One of my favourite quotations comes from the famous anthropologist Margaret Mead, who said: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has". The point I am trying to make, however, is that we need to believe in our ability to make a difference while also setting ourselves achievable goals. These goals need to relate to both long-term and short-term planning. In other words, the most effective responses to difference are those where teachers are able to plan ahead.

# Plan ahead

When I talk about setting long-term goals, I am referring to the process that teachers go through at the start of a year or a term, when they plan out all their objectives for the coming period. While much of the focus during planning time is on issues of curriculum and assessment, many teachers also think explicitly about the kind of educational environment they want to create. One dimension of this process relates to the area of difference.

In many instances, teachers are assisted in their planning by particular curriculum documents. It is relatively common, for instance, for general policy guidelines and specific curriculum documents to refer to the importance of adhering to principles of inclusivity, or equity, in planning around curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. It is also

quite common for these documents to require engagement with specific paradigms of difference such as gender, socio-cultural background and religion. This, however, does not automatically facilitate the kind of inclusive or transformative practice we have been advocating in this book. While the various documents that shape the practice of individual teachers may fit within this transformative framework, this is not an automatic situation.

As we discussed in chapter one, there are many different ways in which difference is conceptualised and responded to. Similarly, there are many different ways in which well-intentioned equity agendas can run off the rails — through tokenism or stereotyping, for instance. While I am not suggesting that curriculum frameworks fall into those traps, I do believe that every teacher should be able to take up a position in regard to what others are saying about dealing with difference if they are going to be able to sustain their own particular transformative agenda.

This means that educators need to take the time to assess the relative strengths and weaknesses of:

- broad frameworks associated with difference
- specific classroom activities designed to respond to difference.

Moreover, they need to do this by applying criteria that they believe in themselves. This relates as much to the framework outlined in this book as it does to anything else! Clearly, I have a particular set of beliefs that inform why and how difference should be explored in educational settings. Equally clearly, these beliefs reflect my own experiences, my own strengths and weaknesses as an educator, and my own vision for the future of Australian society. I have put forward steps associated with transformative analysis which I believe can help to maximise the chance that we can construct and celebrate diverse and positive images of difference. In planning for a school year, however, each teacher must think through the ways in which curriculum documents, policy statements, texts such as this one and the opinions held by themselves, their colleagues and their friends can help them set and work towards identifiable and realistic goals.

This is another important point. While I have outlined a broad agenda for change throughout this book, it is vital for all of us to realise that our day-to-day or term-to-term goals need to be realistic and appropriate to our specific workplace, our cultural circumstances and our skill levels. In setting up some long-term goals, teachers might make a conscious choice to focus on, say, four particular paradigms of difference such as physical ability, gender, cultural diversity and religious diversity. With this in mind, they could review every unit/module plan (as well as each major activity or initiative) and ask questions about how they might deal with issues around these particular paradigms of difference throughout those activities. In other words, they could use the steps of transformative analysis to ask questions about the kinds of activities, resources, terminology and practices that they plan to use.

Setting up goals relating to classroom transformation early in a year is useful for three reasons.

- It allows teachers to anticipate the kinds of resources they are going to need. This helps to overcome the scarcity of resources relating to difference, and ensures that the teacher will be ready to pounce on any resources they stumble across on TV, in newspapers and so on. They can also use their networks to alert friends/family and other teachers that they are looking for resources about, for instance, cultural diversity, that are suitable for Year 3 students.
- It can help to avoid situations where we get to the end of a term (or year) and realise that we haven't paid any significant attention to issues of, say, ability or cultural diversity.
- It allows us to communicate our broad philosophies about difference to students right from the beginning of the year. This means that students will be alert from the outset that they are in an environment that asks them to respect the differences among and between their classmates. In other words, students start learning about difference from day one.

This last point is important: teachers are generally very used to setting up classroom rules with students early in a teaching period. It is less common for them to introduce students to ideas of difference in any direct or overt fashion during the important orientation period. There are several ways in which this can be done.

# Make a start

The strategy used for introducing a particular perspective on difference will vary from year level to year level, but a number of quite common activities can be used or adapted in the primary-school setting.

The first thing to remember is that the goal of introductory activities is to bring students to a point where they can recognise the existence of differences and begin to speak positively about these differences. Students need to learn new ways of thinking, responding and talking in relation to difference. It is often up to teachers to model new language.

Almost any warm-up activity that you routinely use in your classes can be adapted to ensure that issues associated with difference are accommodated. Here are three that have been used with success in various classrooms. Each makes use of different kinds of resources and may therefore be more suitable to different student groups.

## Getting to know you

- All the people in a class (including the teacher) sit in a circle with one chair either in the middle or designated as the 'starting chair'. The teacher starts in the middle chair and says something about him/herself, like "I am one of three children". All the other people who are like that stand up or say "Oh, me too". (They could signal in some other way; it is sometimes fun to make it a race to see who is the quickest, or loudest, or quietest in their answer — provided the criteria are varied throughout the game so that different types of students have a chance to be the first to respond.) An alternative is to make the next person the one who is physically closest to the person in the chair.
- The next person moves into the centre chair (or takes a turn from their own chair) and shares something about their interests or life. After everyone has had a turn, the students can break up into groups and tell stories about ways in which they might be *different* from other people.

This can also be set up as a competition, with students challenged to come up with 20, or 50, or 100 ways in which the members of their group differ from each other.

## Care groups

This activity is particularly useful for lower-primary students.

- Start with a story, poem or video about caring for others. For example, the movie *Babe* (which we examined earlier) shows a pig with a very big and non-traditional care group, and a farmer, who is also very gentle, warm and nurturing. You will be able to think of other examples yourself.
- Ask students to think about all the ways people care for others. What does it mean to care? To be careful? To be caring?
- Have students collect magazine/book pictures of people demonstrating care.
- Encourage students to produce written or pictorial representations of their own *care groups* — friends, families, pets etc. Ask them to consider the people who make them feel good, do nice things for them, and help them grow. Emphasise that some people are in big networks, some in small; not all the people who care for us are related to us.
- Have students identify some of the things they do with people from their care groups — go to the beach, cook dinner, go to worship etc. (Encourage students to provide examples of people they might not see all that often.)

This activity can be used as a basis for follow-up activities throughout the year. For instance, students could be given space to work on an 'I feel good when ...' book, poster or quilt. In this activity (which has evident links to Health and Physical Education), students are encouraged to think about things that make them feel good.

Every couple of weeks (or whenever it suits), they can add words or images about feeling good to their 'good book'. (This could also be done as a class project, with students being taught how to contribute to a quilt or wall hanging. This offers a way of involving family and community members in the classroom as experts who can help kids sew, use puffy paints, do leatherwork and so on. If a variety of media are used, this project can accommodate, and perhaps transform, gendered preferences for certain media.) This is a useful replacement for traditional birthday celebrations, which may alienate some students.

## Mapping differences

- Early in the year, have students construct a map of the world and draw lines from their own location (Rockhampton, for example) to some of the places that have influenced the members of their care group (not just their biological family). They might identify a link between themselves and France, where their grandparents were born, or Costa Rica, where their aunt visited last year and returned with some glass pyramids. This is a useful variation on a family-tree activity, which can alienate students who don't have the traditional kind of family and who often have to leave blanks, or leave out significant people.
- Using the map as a basis, encourage students to 'visit a country' or place and get to know something about it. This can be done at regular intervals in relation to many different learning areas. Challenge students to come up with at least two different stories about any country they research. This helps avoid stereotyping.
- To complement this, it is helpful to have classroom visitors from a range of backgrounds talk about some traditional and non-traditional dimensions of the countries with which they identify (including Australia). This could be the basis for a multicultural celebration that moves beyond simple stereotyping or tokenistic inclusions of cultural groups. It will help to avoid the trap of multicultural days which are the only time in the year where diverse cultures are represented. One of the most powerful sessions I have ever attended at a university was run by a Burmese-Australian woman who challenged students' preconceived notions about 'Asian' women when she explained that women in Burma do not change their name when they marry, and that the whole concept of a name change seemed bizarre to her. With this one example, students were forced to rethink common representations of women from Asia as passive and apolitical, and to examine some of the practices within Australian society that appear so natural.
- Having explored differences between Australia and other countries, students can then start thinking about the differences within their own country and their own town/school.

With a basis for thinking about difference in place, it is then important to deal with difference in both implicit and explicit ways.

# Practise inclusion every day

Through day-to-day repetition, inclusive attitudes towards difference can come to appear as though they are as natural as exclusive attitudes. Having introduced students early on in a year to an activity explicitly designed to foster reflection on sameness and difference, it is therefore helpful if you can keep the following points in mind.

## Talk the talk

Model the use of inclusive language. The words we use when describing other people have a huge impact upon how they feel (and how they are perceived by others). It is therefore important to be aware of the difference between inclusive and exclusive language. This isn't about being politically correct or having meaningless debates about whether or not man-hole covers now need to be called something else. It is about breaking the assumptions associated with some commonplace language and getting into new habits that match up to our beliefs about the importance of valuing difference.

This can feel strange sometimes: the first time I used the term 'caregiver' in place of the term 'parent', I felt like an idiot. But having been on the receiving end of lots of letters sent home from schools, I can assure you that the greeting 'Dear caregiver' is much more inclusive than the greeting 'Dear parents' or 'Dear Mum'.

One of the important spin-offs of modelling inclusive vocabulary is that it helps students to develop their own inclusive terms. Students can only communicate with the language at their disposal. If they are used to hearing immigrants spoken about as 'wogs' or 'refos' and don't have an alternative option, how can we expect them to communicate positively?

A variation on talking the talk involves including reference to difference in day-to-day activities. So if you're encouraging students to do a project on an Australian author, for example, don't just list Henry Lawson and Banjo Patterson and other traditional inclusions. Add women, people of colour and people from diverse backgrounds. This reminds students of the differences that exist but which are often rendered invisible in traditional classroom practice. As a general rule, it is a good idea to read over any list of people/topics before providing it to students. Ask yourself the "who is included" question and see how many people/topics outside the traditions of that particular task you have thought of.

## Seize the day

In addition to having a big-picture plan with some key activities scheduled throughout the year, it is important to try and deal with difference in day-to-day teaching. This means thinking about the way particular paradigms of difference are commonly represented in relation to particular topics. For example, if the topic of Australians at war comes up, it can be helpful to encourage students to identify the roles men *and* women have played in war (to discuss gender roles). They could also be asked to think about the European occupation of Australia (to discuss racial/cultural issues) or to discuss the Eureka stockade (to identify socio-economic circumstances).

If focusing on sport — the Olympics, for example — attention could be drawn to the difference between the numbers of medals won by the poorer, majority-world countries and the richer, minority-world countries like the USA and Australia. Students could also be encouraged to think about the Paralympics or to pick a 'hero' who didn't win a medal.

The course of a day can provide a lot of serendipitous moments where teachers can choose to make a point about difference. The challenge is being alert to the ways in which an opening in a conversation or lesson can be capitalised on.

## Make connections across the curriculum

Dealing with difference isn't confined to special half-hour lessons once a month. Nor can it be 'added on' at the end of a term. If we are working to deconstruct and denaturalise narrow and exclusive responses to difference, we need to do that systematically and regularly. This means looking for ways in which we can integrate diverse images from various paradigms of difference into all our various learning areas. Within The Arts, for instance, we are challenged to attend to the contributions to painting, music and literature by people outside the traditional 'canons'. Within Science, we have the responsibility to reveal that scientific discovery and skills are not limited to a privileged few. And in our Health and Physical Education classes, we have a responsibility to ensure that concepts such as health, fitness, sport, recreation and physicality are defined and illustrated in ways that include as diverse a group of people as possible.

Of course, lessons focused on English, History or Society and the Environment seem to lend themselves particularly well to the exploration of the issues at the heart of this book. They are also logical places for teaching the precise skills of transformative analysis that the book advocates. It is valuable for teachers to be alert to the ways in which defined literacy-learning goals can be used to advance agendas associated with difference. For example, one general literacy goal is to identify the way texts are produced for particular audiences. This goal can easily be adapted to ensure that students highlight the kind of audience being assumed (and being left out) by a text. This is significant: if a text takes a narrow view of difference, its author has probably taken a narrow view of its audience. Similarly, the specific goal of understanding tenor

could identify the way in which a particular kind of audience is encouraged to laugh at, ridicule or otherwise critique particular kinds of characters.

In other words, planning within particular curriculum or discipline frameworks can also provide opportunities for meeting our general goals associated with difference. This, in turn, helps to maximise the chance that when we represent difference, we do so in ways that transcend stereotyping or tokenistic inclusions and lead to ultimately to a celebration of difference.

## Celebrate, don't tolerate

In an earlier chapter, I emphasised the importance of working not merely to tolerate difference (as though inclusion is a gift that 'normal' people give to 'those others'), but also to celebrate difference. It is important to mention this point here again, because drawing attention to difference can often lead to a situation where the group under focus (be it single-parent families or people from non-English-speaking backgrounds) is being patronised or 'ticked off the list'. This approach continues to put people in their place — outside of the mythical norm.

It is essential to celebrate these different ways of living and being. But there is often a fine line between positivity and patronage ("There, there — good on you"). Remember that we can best celebrate differences by *naturalising* them — and that involves repetition, not one-off condescensions.

## Be ruthless with resources

This is a hard one. Teachers are used to working with very few resources, so the idea that some might need to be thrown out or locked in a cupboard can be hard to take. I'm not talking here about texts which may be traditional but can still have a place in an overall classroom-text strategy. What I am referring to are those texts which deal with differences in overtly negative, stereotypical or tokenistic fashions. These texts generally cause more problems then they are worth, because we need to remember that these traditional representations reproduce images that the students are probably seeing in many other texts within and outside the school. If you are trying to introduce *new* ways of thinking about difference, the last thing you need are texts that encourage students back into the traditional spaces.

So, wherever possible, sort through your resources at the start of each year, remove those that are too limiting to be of any use (unless you plan to use them as texts for students to critique), and be on the lookout for transformative texts that you can beg, borrow, steal or even purchase legitimately to support your own transformative agenda.

## Have some fun

This may sound like an obvious point to make, but it's an issue I have encountered sufficiently often in discussions with teachers for me to feel it worthwhile raising here. Dealing with difference can often sound like serious business — and when you consider what is at stake, there is no doubt but that it actually *is* serious business. However, as with most things that we try to teach, there is a much greater chance that students will take the ideas on board if they have some fun while they are learning about them.

This means that it is important to deal with differences in ways that aren't always deadly serious. For example, discussing the specifics of racially motivated discrimination is a very important goal for educators. It is important for students to have an understanding of how common this kind of discrimination has been, not just in other countries, but in Australia — and not just in the dim, dark recesses of the nineteenth century. However, it is also important that we don't create limiting associations. For example, if we associate discussions around racial background with Aboriginality, and then link Aboriginal Australians' experiences solely with tragic or horrifying imagery, students may come to see discussions of Aboriginality as fundamentally depressing. This does not mean that I think the experiences of whole groups of people should be glossed over or trivialised. What I am suggesting, though, is that we need to be very careful about not representing these same groups of people only in 'victimised' terms. I am reminded of the words of Sneja Gunew (1991:33), who expressed her frustration with the common portrayals of ethnic/migrant women:

> *In Australia, ethnic and migrant women are sick of being characterised … as kitchen-slaves, mute factory-fodder, baby-machines whose lives are supposedly totally dominated by their patriarchal husbands. The implications are patronising and humiliating to say the least.*

Gunew helps make the point that while we should not delete or conceal stories of discrimination or struggle, we need to be mindful of the strategic importance of positive, fun images in broadening people's attitudes towards difference. Let me give another example by returning to our old friend Snow White. Even if the existing character inclusions in Snow White are not challenged, you can quite easily explore the point that differences are given value by the ways in which characters are represented, simply by playing with the title. Consider these alternative titles to *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*:

- *Sleepy and the Super Six Meet the White Girl*
- *Eat My Core, Whitey!*
- *Disobeying Orders: The Diary of a Servant Who Wouldn't Kill.*

Each title involves a significant repositioning of the characters, genre and dominant themes. This is a revealing and playful process that provides great insights into the many aspects of narratives that are in some sense concealed. You can try it with any text once its characters and ideas become familiar.

# Evaluation

When reflecting on proposed or completed classroom activities, we need to apply the same criteria that we have used to analyse other texts. That means we need to ask ourselves about the extent to which our classroom was able to:

- challenge traditional representations of difference
- include characters from a range of paradigms of difference
- value these characters
- represent these characters in diverse (non-stereotypical) ways
- give these characters central roles
- work to represent difference as natural, desirable and normal within a particular genre and within society more generally.

Because we are all fundamentally individuals, and because each classroom will have its own character and its own heterogeneity, the specific ways in which we approach these goals will vary from one site to another. I have no interest in trying to generate standardised responses of a the 'one-size-fits-all' variety. What I hope, however, is that the kinds of activities and ideas outlined in this chapter can support teachers as they begin or continue their own transformative journeys.

# Conclusion

The creation of transformative texts (or transformative textual environments) is greatly facilitated by a willingness to think about and engage with the kinds of activities outlined in this chapter. No single pathway will lead to transformation, but there are some recognisable starting points and some pretty significant landmarks along the way that can help us to maximise the chance that we are heading in a transformative direction. In the next chapter, I'll illustrate some ways in which the transformative agenda can be used to give shape to a range of specific classroom activities, all of which deal positively and creatively with difference.

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## A common question

***I want to follow this transformative agenda, but I honestly don't think I have time to replan an entire year, or even a term. Can I make do with lesson plans from other years if I 'add in' activities informed by transformative textual analysis?***

Looking for new takes on old practices is one of the most important ways in which teachers can engage with transformative agendas while maintaining their sanity. Throwing out every lesson plan you've ever put together isn't generally all that helpful. Instead, it is far more valuable to cast a critical eye over what already exists and assess it honestly and reflectively to see if it can be modified to attend meaningfully to issues of difference. Think about the examples earlier on — lists of 'adventurers' given to students (p 37). The traditional list here is exclusive of differences associated with gender, nationality and economic status (not to mention physical ability). But with a few modifications, and a few strategically managed resources, the same activity can become a place where students encounter not only positive and celebratory images from various paradigms of difference, but where they also learn to redefine what we mean by terms such as 'adventure', 'bravery' and 'courage.'

So the short answer is no, you don't necessarily need to throw everything away. Mind you, there is no point in compromising if compromise is going to rest upon texts that are fundamentally exclusive when it comes to difference. Texts that portray stereotypical images of women, for instance, can be valuable if they are used to highlight how common and how damaging these kinds of stereotypes actually are. But if they are going to be left to stand alone, then, frankly, yes, I'd rather see them thrown away!

# Chapter Seven

## Traditional days in different ways: Creating transformative classroom texts

We've explored some of the basic and day-to-day ways in which teachers can work towards including and valuing signs of difference. In this chapter, I'd like to build on those points by illustrating how the transformative approach can be used to rethink some long-standing and widespread classroom practices.

To focus this discussion, I'm going to look at the broad field of 'celebration' within a schooling context. This seems to me like an area within which most teachers have had lots of experience: from Australia Day all the way through to Christmas, teachers are under pressure to find ways to help students connect with (and enjoy) a host of traditional celebrations.

Celebrations are generally intended to be 'feelgood' occasions, but they can make some students feel very bad — students who don't have a sense that their own circumstances, beliefs or experiences are valued within the celebration. There are, however, inclusive ways to celebrate traditional days.

Let me start by outlining how the perspective I have put forward on transformative texts (what they do and how they deal with difference) can influence the construction of classroom activities.

# Transformative analysis for transformative practice

In the preceding chapters, we saw that transformative texts challenge traditional representations of difference by including characters from a range of paradigms of difference, by valuing these characters and by representing them in diverse (non-stereotypical) ways while giving them central roles — all with a view to representing difference as natural, desirable and normal within a particular genre and within society more generally.

We can use these principles to think about the ways in which we might respond to cultural celebrations. As we have done in the other kinds of textual analysis up to this point, we need to think about the groups of people who might be left out or devalued within traditional celebrations, and to search for ways to broaden who/what is included. This can require us to think outside of the traditional patterns and to create new ways of dealing with a particular celebration.

The points that I'd like to make about this process are best made through illustration. Let's start by looking at Christmas. In the following analysis, I will be looking not only at specific texts associated with Christmas but with the whole notion of 'Christmas' as something of a meta-text. That is, Christmas (or any other celebration) doesn't exist just on Christmas cards, or in Christmas stories or Christmas trees. Rather, there is a whole discourse associated with Christmas that both reflects and influences individual Christmas texts. So while I may be analysing some specific 'Christmassy' activities, I am also trying to draw attention to the whole Christmas phenomenon.

## Christmas traditions

As a starting point, we need to reflect, at least briefly, on how Christmas celebrations are traditionally dealt with in Australian schools. I am referring here to non-denominational schools rather than those Christian schools which generally take up a particular religious theme. The general points, however, relate to both contexts.

The first thing to do is to work quickly through the steps of transformative analysis (see p 47 or 81) to identify the kinds of challenges we might be facing.

*Status*. It is probably fair to say that the various texts associated with Christmas in schools have pretty high status. There are few environments within Australia where Christmas isn't spoken of positively. Students go to schools within a culture that has a veritable Christmas obsession: from as early as September, shops are festooned with decorations, carols about winter wonderlands bombard shoppers staggering about in 35-degree heat, and every second weekend seems to have some kind of Christmas celebration attached to it. In this context, it is difficult for schools to ignore altogether the arrival of the Christmas season. It is also possible to argue that this cultural

commitment to (at least the commercial version of) Christmas provides schools with a very good opportunity to engage students in reflections about some important issues. So there are two sets of reasons why we might choose to engage with, rather than completely ignore, the Christmas season.

*Traditional approaches to difference.* Having determined to use the Christmas season in some way throughout the last term of school, it is necessary for us to alert ourselves to some of the traditional ways in which Christmas celebrations deal with difference. We can do this by thinking about the standard questions of transformative analysis set out on page 47 (and 81).

Thinking about these questions, while also reflecting upon the eight paradigms of difference (p 13) that we have mostly focused on, leads me to make the following claims about traditional Christmas celebrations:

- In its commercial form, Christmas emphasises mass consumption, and full participation assumes a fairly high income level.
- The advertisements routinely associated with Christmas products adhere to the broader Australian cultural traditions around advertising. That is, they tend to feature a small group of character 'types' (generally excluding people who are not white, able-bodied or physically attractive, for example), and regularly perpetuate traditional gender stereotypes.
- Christmas discourses tend to emphasise such 'universal' images as family, togetherness and harmony, but usually by representing very specific versions of 'the family'.
- The religious imagery associated with Christmas emphasises Western interpretations of the Christian symbols. In the Australian context, almost no attention is paid to the variations that exist in other Christianised countries, or to the fact that Christmas is not, in fact, a significant feast day or moment of celebration in non-Christian religions.

If we think about the risks associated with these kinds of practices and assumptions, it is possible to identify several points of potential concern. First, it is highly likely that some students will feel pressured or threatened by celebrations that emphasise present-giving (such as the popular 'secret Santa' ritual, in which students have to buy a present for another student whose name is selected out of a hat).

Second, it is equally possible that adherence to the traditional 'family'-oriented Christmas imagery (in colour-in activities, storytelling or whatever) will alienate students who do not have the stereotypical family reunion for Christmas. Indeed, with so many students living in blended and step families, Christmas is often a time when students move between households. They may experience two or three Christmases, each with a different care group.

Third, the religious symbolism associated with Christmas is clearly specific to Christian religions, and is often quite different from the practices associated with Christmas in other countries, cultures and belief systems. Students who are either not Christian, or whose Christian heritage connects with somewhere other than Australia, may feel alienated by classroom rituals that emphasise one particular version of 'the Christmas story'.

This does not mean that the religious significance of the period can or should be ignored. I personally believe that the whole narrative around the birth of Jesus can be used as a way of making many valuable points consistent with the aims of this book: it can be a way of discussing hope, generosity, new beginnings and family, as well as issues associated with both tolerance and persecution. To maximise the potential of this occasion as a learning opportunity, however, it is necessary to plug into an overall agenda that seeks to value the differences among and between people. Two strategies have proven quite popular in this regard. I'd like to explore them here.

## Many Decembers

The December period (including Christmas Day) has lots of different connotations for lots of different people. To pursue this theme, a class can work to identify a wide range of ways in which December is experienced in various countries and in various parts of Australia.

For example, students could collect stories about the activities associated with December from countries that they have connections to (England, Indonesia, Argentina and the United States, for instance). In collecting these stories, they could cover both religious festivals and other kinds of activities contained within that month. This investigation has the potential to draw attention both to the diversity *across* religious groups (involving reference to the Jewish celebrations around Hanukkah, for instance) and *within* religious groups.

The rituals associated with Christmas in many South American countries, for instance, are quite different from those in some Western countries. Religious celebrations in Mexico throughout December and January are diverse. The time commonly includes ten days of celebration devoted to the Virgin of Guadalupe (Patron Saint of Mexico), pre-Christmas 'posadas' where people enact the journey of Mary and Joseph on their donkey for up to 12 days before Christmas Day (often arriving at a church on Christmas Eve), and gift-giving not only on Christmas Day but also (and sometimes only) on January 6 — Three Kings Day.

This kind of activity is particularly valuable if the class has been exploring other countries throughout the year (in the way suggested in the previous chapter).

One of the key requirements that this demands of teachers, however, is that they themselves do some research around alternative Christmas/December rituals. This enables students to better direct their own enquires, and obviates the ever-present danger of stereotyping whole countries or religious groups on the evidence contained

within one book or website. To minimise this risk, it is important that teachers keep the students focused on the diversity question, so that they continually acknowledge that even though many Jews may celebrate Hannukah, and many Christians may celebrate Christmas, they may choose to do it in very different ways.

Focusing on the different Decembers throughout Australia and the world also allows attention to be drawn to holiday activities or rituals that may have nothing at all to do with religious tradition.

The overall point of this kind of activity, then, is that it encourages students to reflect upon international and intranational diversity. To achieve this, it needs to be accompanied by student reflections on some of the diverse ways in which they live their own lives in December. This is risky territory — it can lead straight back into thinking about presents and shopping — but if set up correctly, it can become instead a place where students reflect on some of the things that they enjoy about December.

## Rise above it: A themed December

Another inclusive Christmas strategy involves selecting a theme around which all of the classroom activities for the season can be organised. An emphasis on the different ways in which students enjoy December can be used to structure group activities (such as a class concert) that have a theme which is general enough to include the diverse range of issues that may be associated with Christmas. For example, a December concert in Queensland could easily be organised around the theme 'Feeling Hot, Hot, Hot'. This doesn't automatically exclude reference to Christmas or Santa via carols or the like, but it allows other dimensions of the year to be included, given equal space, and valued.

Similarly, students could be asked to paint a window in the classroom with images from their favourite part of December. Once again, this would allow some students to communicate specific experiences of Christmas, while others might focus on the joys of school holidays, or sleeping in, or going to the beach. In this way, a range of activities, a diverse set of experiences, and multiple families and lifestyles can be given equal space and equal value.

Alternatively, a series of activities focused on the broader 'spirit' of Christmas — such as sharing or caring — could become the organising principle for the month. This shifts attention away from the commercial or religious nature of the celebration, but allows those who *do* have a Christian connection to feel legitimated.

The key in the last couple of examples lies in finding a theme that is big enough to encompass traditional images/meanings — things that a teacher might not wish to discourage — while allowing space for other images/meanings to be included. This general strategy is useful for thinking through many other traditional holidays or celebrations. Let's look at two brief examples.

# Anzac Day and Easter

More than any other day associated with war and peace, Anzac Day is a significant ritual within Australia. Many people feel strongly about the importance of honouring the sacrifices made by those who defended the country, and of ensuring that we don't forget how easy it can be to end up in a state of war. Now I have no personal objection to these sentiments myself. However, it is possible to argue that days such as Anzac Day can have unintended consequences, particularly in a society that is characterised by ever-increasing cultural diversity.

Let me be more specific. Anzac Day and its associated public holiday, marches, songs and storytelling are based upon assumptions about the good guys ('us') and the bad guys ('them') during the war. This means that it is predominantly students from the countries allied with Australia during World Wars 1 and 2, and other wars such as those in Vietnam and Korea, who are likely to find something to identify with in Anzac Day celebrations. People from other cultural backgrounds (including those from countries such as Germany or Japan who may have been resident in Australia during the war but regarded as suspect during that time) may have vastly different memories or feelings about these same wars and celebrations. Similarly, those who lived in (or are descended from) countries who were allied against Australia may feel troubled by reminders that their grandparents were, in Australian eyes, 'the baddies'. I am reminded of a student telling me how mortified she always felt in primary school when members of the Returned Servicemen's League would visit their school each year around Anzac Day and hand out medals to those students whose parents had served in the war. Although her father had also served in the war, she was never given a medal — he'd fought on the 'wrong' side.

This is not an isolated incident. Many students end up feeling decidedly uneasy about messages that seem to position the people from their cultural background as the enemies of Australian heroes. The challenge here is to explore historical events without positioning any one group of people as *automatically* good or evil. This is a tricky space. I would never want to be in the position of arguing that within Nazi Germany, for instance, there were not atrocities committed against a vast range of people. However, it *is* possible to discuss these actions in ways which do not universally demonise all Germans. I am not suggesting it is easy, but it is vital that we try to avoid setting up simple 'good guys' / 'bad guys' dichotomies when discussing historical events.

Once again, the issue is not so much whether to exclude these kinds of celebrations altogether from schooling environments, but rather how to acknowledge their existence without alienating individuals. The thematic strategy introduced above can therefore come into play. Activities focused around Anzac Day do not only raise students' awareness of their own history. They offer an opportunity to reflect upon the importance of things like tolerance, harmony, peace, freedom and so on. Each one of these ideas can be usefully taken up as themes around which a series of lessons can be organised which can accommodate (but not be dominated by) any individual day.

A peace, forgiveness or 'starting over' theme, for instance, could be used to set up a whole range of classroom activities. Indeed, depending upon the timing in a particular year, the themed activities could start prior to Easter and last all the way through to Anzac Day. Again, there is a vast range of ways in which these themes can be used to structure lessons and classroom activities. Here are just a few specific examples.

- Instead of celebrating with Easter-egg hunts or religious festivals, Easter can be used as a time to celebrate forgiveness or 'new beginnings'. Read books that focus on individuals making mistakes and being forgiven. Provide quiet time or group time for students to create images that illustrate other stories of people making mistakes and being forgiven. (This is also a space where discussion around things that make people feel bad — like name-calling, bullying, harassment, being ignored and so on — can be introduced.)
- If you are confident that you know the class well enough to manage the possible ramifications, a useful 'starting over' or 'hope' experience can be organised by first asking students to write — on big pieces of paper — bad things that have happened to them, or things they wish they hadn't done, or regrets. This experience can be tricky if it confronts students with unwelcome memories, so it's a good idea to model expectations by saying "I felt sad when I broke my sister's CD player" or "I felt sad when I was bad-tempered with the class". The pieces of paper are then shredded and used in a paper-recycling activity. Add pieces of confetti or brightly coloured paper to the shredded paper mix and involve all the students in making paper. At the end of the activity, give each student a new piece of paper upon which to write or draw something good that they are looking forward to.
- For a less potentially volatile take on this theme, students could recycle some of their school books (or pages from them) from the first term of school, and the teacher could emphasise that the class will be 'starting fresh' in the next term, after Easter.
- As an adjunct to these activities, students could be involved in a tree-planting activity, with an emphasis on the way we need trees for our future.
- These kinds of 'new beginning' activities can be accompanied by studies of the way things and people change: from caterpillars to butterflies; from little seedlings to flowers; and so on.
- This is also a good time to have students imagine themselves in five, ten or twenty years' time. This is particularly important for students in difficult personal situations — they need to be able to imagine a world when things will be different for them. Looking at biographies of people who have achieved more than they could hope for is also a good activity here. This can involve stories of everyone from Cathy Freeman to Shania Twain, Jesus to Gandhi, Mother Teresa to Frank McCourt, depending upon the year level and interests of the class.

As an alternative, the class could set up a 'heroes' or 'bravery' theme. Students can then be encouraged to identify the ways in which people are often brave when faced with situations over which they have little control. This is also a good time to explore the difference between bravery and risk-taking, between heroes and bullies, and between asking for help and whingeing.

To supplement work around this theme, students might identify the many different ways in which people are brave or heroic. Here, teachers could seek to include: famous and less-conspicuous people such as soldiers, mothers, sportspeople and kids; jobs that require bravery, such as police work, emergency services, nursing, publishing, counselling. They could also be given space to think about or name ways in which they have been brave.

Once again, it is important to make use of a range of resources that show women, people of colour, kids, people with disabilities and so on being brave in one or more ways.

## A final case: Mother's Day and Father's Day

The various strategies and suggestions put forward above all rest upon the willingness of educators to think about how traditional celebrations may exclude or devalue particular groups of people and to try out new ways of embracing, and often redefining, special occasions. As I have shown, the challenges associated with the way a specific 'day' deals with difference can be overcome by identifying a core theme or message that is compatible with the traditional understandings of that day, and then using this theme as the organising idea. The value of this approach is well illustrated by thinking briefly about two of the most challenging days that teachers negotiate — Mother's Day and Father's Day.

There is little doubt that both of these celebrations (commercially inspired or otherwise) have a high status in Australian contexts. There is equally little doubt that most of the public representations of these days assume that it is not difficult for individuals to track down and bestow gifts upon their mothers and fathers. These gifts (of various descriptions) are generally represented as ways of say 'thank you' for the various parenting/caregiving roles carried out by mums and dads throughout the year.

It's clear that saying thanks can be seen as a good thing. Equally clearly, however, limiting the thankyous associated with caregiving to biological mums and dads places pressures upon those who find themselves in less traditional families. Many children grow up without access to their mother or their father. Others may have a mother and a stepmother (a stepmother with whom they might even have a positive relationship!); still others may have grandparents, aunts, siblings or foster parents as their primary caregivers. Traditional responses to Mother's Day and Father's Day tend to deny children the opportunity to say thanks to the diverse range of people who play significant roles in their lives — while depriving those who provide this kind of

support much in the way of public thanks. They also place pressure on kids to feel grateful to parents who may *not* actually be providing them with desirable care.

If we accept that public or formal acknowledgement is a good thing in the first place, then simply avoiding the whole area isn't much of a solution. Once again, therefore, it is necessary to look for a way to include the good bits of the traditional idea while also responding to issues of difference.

One of the most common ways to get around this situation is to turn to the central ideas behind the days — those of caring, sharing and thanking people. These themes are sufficiently broad as to allow virtually anyone to find a point of connection. There are a number of ways in which teachers could adopt a theme around these ideas.

For example, exploration could begin with an overt discussion of the upcoming day ("Who knows what Sunday is?"). This could be followed by a class discussion around why days like Mother's Day are important. Then the class could be asked to think about all the different things that mums might do in looking after kids (this is also a way of breaking down stereotypes about mothers' roles). From this basis, the teacher could encourage students to think about the diverse range of people who often fill these same roles. The teacher could, indeed, lead the way here by volunteering the fact that it was her father, for instance, who always made her lunch (or his sister who always drove him to football training).

So, by extending the frame of the questions and encouraging the students to do things like draw their own network of caregivers, the emphasis shifts from the importance of a traditional *mother* to the importance of people who *care*. This, of course, can still *include* mums — it just doesn't require the students to limit their thinking in this way.

Alternatively, the teacher may choose to avoid mentioning the specific day at all, and open up discussion around the broad theme of caring or sharing. An increasingly wide range of popular-culture resources are available to support this kind of discussion. The very popular kids' show *Sabrina*, for instance, features a witch who is raised by her two aunts. In another witchy show, *Charmed*, three sisters act as carers for each other. The connections between shows such as these and youth audiences make them valuable references, even if teachers don't want to bring them into a classroom. Students themselves are valuable sources of information about the ways in which popular-culture shows portray non-traditional families.

From this basis, the class could work together to think of ways to say thank you to people without spending money. Whether the group decides to write letters, construct cards, make up songs, bake a cake, press a dried flower or simply promise to say 'Thank you' doesn't really matter. What *is* important is that if students are sent home from school with a card/letter/present to give to someone, they should have control over who they are giving it to. The role of the teacher in modelling this approach can be very important; I would strongly suggest that the teacher be seen to make a card (or whatever other token is being constructed) for someone other than the traditional mother/father — a neighbour, perhaps, or a pet.

Taken together, these activities can maximise the chance that the occasion, as mediated in class, can be positive, rather than one where students feel inadequate or 'too different' when compared with other students.

There are still some students who would find this kind of activity difficult. This includes those who may recently have lost a parent to divorce, death, or through relocation. In these instances, teachers are challenged to make a judgement about the extent to which it is possible to make the activities into positive experiences for the entire class. If it just doesn't seem like it will work, then steering right away from it for a year may indeed be the best solution.

# Summing it up

The key message that I would like to communicate here is that teachers have the potential to create learning environments within which traditional celebrations such as Easter, Anzac Day, Christmas and birthdays can be used to make points that a wide range of students can identify with. To achieve this goal, we need to be willing to examine all the component texts that go into a particular lesson, or series of lessons, or celebration day, to ask ourselves how well those texts have accommodated difference.

That means we need to be thinking about how well our texts:

- *challenge traditional representations of difference*: Have we considered, for instance, which people from the eight paradigms of difference are routinely included and excluded within these celebrations? Have we thought about which groups of people might see themselves represented negatively (as the bad guys) or in some way as 'abnormal' by particular practices? (Students from Jehovah's Witnesses backgrounds who do not celebrate birthdays, for instance, can often feel bad if they are provided with a cake by the class; similarly, students who live in blended or single-parent families can feel alienated by Mother's or Father's Day practices that assume a traditional nuclear family.)
- *include characters from a range of paradigms of difference*: Have we worked to ensure that a range of individuals are included in our own representations? Have we accommodated differences relating to the gender behaviours of our class? Have we provided spaces for people from a range of cultural backgrounds to see their own experiences/perspectives included?
- *value these characters*: Have we valued the people that we do include by showing them positively, and by providing them with the same kinds of feedback/opportunity/rewards as all the other people? Are their experiences given the same validation? The same space? The same degree of respect?

- *represent these characters in diverse (non-stereotypical)* ways: In this particular activity, and in the overall classroom strategy, have we included diverse images of various cultural and social groups? Have we shown the *diverse* ways in which people may go about being an Australian, a father, a hero, an athlete?
- *give these characters central roles*: Have we moved beyond tokenistic inclusions to those where a range of people and experiences are given significant amounts of space and attention?
- *work to represent difference as natural, desirable and normal within a particular genre and within society more generally*: Have we ultimately communicated our belief that differences are not only part of our everyday life and our everyday world, but that there are ways in which we all differ from the mythical norm, and, just as importantly, there are ways in which we are all similar?

If we can work to achieve all of these goals, we are well on the way to the kind of transformative textual production that offers new ways of conceptualising the world and all its differences. And this, ultimately, is what this book is all about.

## A common question

***Isn't there a chance that we'll end up making no one happy if we try to water down key celebrations to cater for the interests of minority groups?***

This raises a number of tricky issues. The first relates to the definition of minority groups. The kinds of cultural practices that we have examined throughout this book work both to create and to naturalise myths about the nature of the 'real' Australian. These myths relate not only to issues of cultural background but also to various physical characteristics and behaviours. From the teenage girl who diets relentlessly to match up cultural myths about physical beauty through to the middle-aged Chinese migrant whose qualifications aren't recognised in Australia, lots of people suffer in varying ways as a result of these myths, and we are not talking about 'minorities' in this sense. But regardless of how many individuals experience the negative consequences of these mythical norms, the larger issue is that we will never achieve a society where differences are valued if we perpetuate traditions that routinely exclude whole groups of people.

This doesn't mean that we have to abandon or reject cherished traditions. What it does mean is that we are all challenged to think about ways in which these traditions

can be improved. Sometimes it helps to keep in mind that the rituals and traditions that often appear natural (and therefore somewhat sacrosanct) are as constructed as every other tradition. This is clearly seen when we look at the vastly different ways in which seemingly universal celebrations like Christmas are celebrated throughout the world. Just as they are made, then, traditions can be remade and remade in ways that reflect not just a tolerance of difference, but an active embracing of the diversity that is *fundamentally Australian*. If modifying the way we think about Christmas or Father's Day can improve the way one individual student experiences activities associated with that day, then I think it's worth the effort.

# Conclusion

## Transformative analysis and counternarratives:

## Other days, other ways

I have argued throughout this book that all educators have a responsibility to attempt to find new ways of responding to difference within our classrooms. I've attempted to outline some of the general strategies and specific ways in which people might go about implementing a transformative agenda in their own classrooms. With the steps of transformative textual analysis in mind, it becomes much easier to think about, analyse and move beyond the traditions associated with various kinds of texts. Once the general principles have been taken on board, it is also possible to take analytical shortcuts, where we assess relatively quickly the ways in which a particular celebration, or genre, has generally dealt with difference, and some of the ways in which this could usefully be challenged. In the table over, for instance, there are examples of this 'speeded-up' thinking, with brief illustrations of the way the terms and processes explored through this book help us shape day-to-day thinking.

The table presents short examples that link the key ideas in this book with teaching/learning opportunities around regular occasions on the yearly calendar. These are short ideas only, and they are open to challenge and adaptation! For example, you need not set out to contest the dominant themes of World Environment Day; rather, you may choose to focus on the participation of people who are often overlooked, e.g. people in biker groups. In this case, for example, you could test conventional portrayals of motorcycle group members: do we see their caring and stable relationships? Do we see them doing the washing, or shopping? You could also look at the language features that revolve around motorcycle club culture, e.g. noun groups like 'bikie gangs', 'turf war', 'confrontations', and modify these to reflect new meanings, e.g. 'motorcycle enthusiasts', 'club rivalry', 'debates'.



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| Teaching/ Learning focus | Simplified analysis of texts' status, and of dominant themes, characters, practices | Selected paradigms of difference | Potential challenges and inclusions | Potential genre focus / textual practices |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| World Environment Day | Increasing community status. Tends to value trees and air quality over, for example, insects and grasses. Attracts suburban volunteerism that tends to equate cleanliness with environmentalism. Encourages recycling but largely silent about consumption. | Socio-economic status<br><br>Gender | Challenge the 'natural' practices of high consumption. Challenge masculinised recreation such as power-boating, drag-racing, bush-bashing. Include vegans, people in low-consuming alternative communities. Valorise surfing, cycling, bushwalking. | Deconstruct and critique argument texts that portray environmentalism as 'putting away' or 'cleaning up' waste. Construct arguments / expositions that position vegans, people in low-consuming alternative communities as model citizens. Identify rural men/boys as nurturers and carers, e.g. through their shopping practices. |
| Book Week | High community status. Emphasises narrative 'literature' over other narratives and other text forms, and represents the reading of literature as inherently good. | Ability<br><br>Sexuality<br><br>Gender | Challenge the notion that the practice of 'reading' revolves around literature. Challenge the relationships and family models that are normalised by most narrative texts. Include visually impaired people. Include same-sex relationships and divergent family configurations. | Recognise visually impaired people and Internet users as readers, and investigate the associated reading practices. Investigate sand-drawings and paintings as narratives. Deconstruct and critique narratives that replicate conventional heterosexual relationships in stable two-parent families. Construct counternarratives that draw on the other modes investigated, and/or that naturalise characters in same-sex or broken relationships. |

| Teaching/ Learning focus | Simplified analysis of texts' status, and of dominant themes, characters, practices | Selected paradigms of difference | Potential challenges and inclusions | Potential genre focus / textual practices |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| NAIDOC Week | Lower-status texts that tend to lie outside of mainstream coverage, e.g. festivals, concerts, community gatherings. Regular focus on traditional community practices. | Physical appearance<br><br>Religion | Challenge the associations of skin colour, clothing etc. that are attached to 'real' Aboriginal people. Challenge Dreaming traditions as the only spiritual expressions of Aboriginal people. Include indigenous businesswomen, authors and managers. Include indigenous enculturations of Christianity. | Explore the notion of Aboriginality as something not connected to appearance. Document TV representations of indigenous Australians. Program a cosmetics campaign that features Aboriginal characters and/or uses Aboriginal English. |
| Senior Citizens' Week | Has high status among some members of the community, but limited status generally. Senior citizens are represented in mainstream texts only rarely, and appear mostly in government-funded infomercials or media texts, where they are often portrayed as helpless or used for laughs. | Financial status<br><br>Age | Challenge media representations of senior citizens as naïve, helpless or passive. Collect examples of senior citizens in the community generally, and in students' own lives, who break down these stereotypes. | Identify some of the diverse behaviours associated with senior citizens. Explore the fact that they are the second-largest group of people making use of the Internet; create information brochures aimed at senior citizens that don't represent them in the traditional ways. |

# Final comments

All of the examples included above — like the others explored throughout the book — are indicative only. They are intended to illustrate some of the ways in which *traditional* representations of aspects of Australia routinely exclude and thereby devalue members of particular paradigms of difference, while also pointing to the potential for these traditions to be transformed so that we can tell new stories — counternarratives — within which differences are not only included and acknowledged, but valued and celebrated in their diversity.

Teachers' own responses to the broad challenges associated with difference will themselves be characterised by diversity. Teachers aren't a homogeneous group any more than any other group of Australian people. We all have our own interests, our own particular agendas, our own strengths and weaknesses. All of this will influence the specific ways in which we go about setting goals and responding to difference in our classrooms. This diversity needs to be acknowledged as a strength; the last thing we need is another orthodoxy or a paint-by-numbers approach to inclusive practice. We need to celebrate, instead, the multiple ways in which individual teachers, schools and class groups work to open up understandings around difference. We need to applaud those moments where mythical norms are questioned and transcended. And we need to keep in mind the overall goal: to create a world where difference can be routinely acknowledged, accepted and valued, and where the question of 'adding it in' no longer even arises.

Every classroom, like every text, will have its limitations. But every classroom also has the potential to encourage students into a space where they open up debate, inquiry and self-reflection. As Trinh Minh-ha (1990:329) has written:

> *Inevitably, a work is always a form of tangible closure. But closures need not close off; they can be doors opening onto other closures and function as on-going passages to an elsewhere (-within-here).*

This is a promise that I see in all educational environments. Rather paradoxically, schools have historically been more interested in closing off inquiry than in opening it up. We have tended to reward students who can come up with the 'right' answer. The approach outlined in this book asks us to call into question some of the 'right' answers that we may have come to take for granted, and to ask more critical and searching questions about the practices, behaviours and beliefs that are part of our world. In Minh-ha's terms (1990:332), this involves "questioning over and over again what is taken for granted as self-evident" and working ultimately towards the transformation of "one's own thinking habits, dissipating what has become familiar and cliched, and participating in the changing of received values — the transformation (without master) of other selves through one's self".

It is my own belief that classrooms can function as places where transformative thinking can become a new norm — places where openness rather than closure, possibility rather than reality, the potential rather than the actual, have prominence.



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This is a long-term goal. But looking around any school, any playground, any shopping centre, skate-park, beach or sporting complex provides me with constant and powerful reminders of just how much is at stake in this quest. In Audre Lorde's terms (1990:286), "the old definitions have not served us, nor the earth that supports us. The old patterns, no matter how cleverly rearranged to imitate progress, still condemn us to cosmetically altered repetitions of the same old exchanges, the same old guilt, hatred, recriminations, lamentations and suspicion". What we need, Lorde argues, are "new ways of relating across difference" (*Ibid.*), and it is this agenda which underpins all the issues raised in this book. While there are no guaranteed formulae for creating inclusive texts, there *are* mindsets and patterns of thinking which have, I believe, greater potential to lead us away from the patterns of the past towards the promise of the future. It is helpful to remember, then, that we do not have to be constrained by tradition, ritual and the appearance of 'normality'. Rather, we can follow new pathways, explore new spaces, and open up new ways of thinking about, living with, and understanding our differences.

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# Glossary

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| celebrate | Represent difference in ways that position it as a positive — something to be glad of, rather than something to be tolerated. |
| centrality | The significant location of a particular characteristic, person or group of people within a text, as opposed to tokenism. |
| counternarrative | A text, story or representation that challenges the norms associated with a particular set of characteristics or behaviours. Counternarratives around gender, for instance, resist stereotypes and portray men and women in diverse, multiple but equally valued ways. |
| cultural context | Defined on p 12. Note that cultural context relates at a broad level to a particular geographical location or country (such as Australia, or Queensland), and in more specific instances to cultural subgroups such as schools, towns, sporting clubs and so on. |
| cultural norms | Behaviours, practices or beliefs that are produced within a particular cultural context, and which are presented through a range of texts as natural in that (and other) contexts. Australia, for instance, circulates cultural norms relating to appropriate behaviours for men and women; other norms relate to what is considered beautiful, how people are expected to interact with other people etc. |
| devalue | Critique, criticise and/or represent negatively a particular characteristic or person. |
| difference | Defined on p 11. |
| discourse | A pattern or style of communicating that is consistent with the values/beliefs of a particular context. Discourses occur in specific contexts — such as a football discourse in a football context — and across contexts, as when people make use, for example, of sporting metaphors or football talk to motivate students in classrooms. Discourses relate not only to beliefs about activities or objects, but also to beliefs about particular characteristics. Within the discourse of mainstream masculinity, for instance, some characteristics and behaviours are valued and regarded as natural, while others are devalued. |

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| diversity | The differences among, within and between members of particular groups. At one level, a group may appear the same (or homogeneous), but upon closer inspection, diversity (or heterogeneity) will almost always become apparent. (Think about the diversity within teachers at your school.) |
| equal-opportunity models | Approaches to difference that emphasise equity of access. |
| equity | A term relating to the belief that all individuals are entitled to the same opportunities, the same respect, and the same kinds of positive experiences. It also captures the notion that fairness is not necessarily achieved by treating everyone in the same way — different people will regularly require different kinds of support to achieve the same outcomes. |
| gender equity | A broad term referring to initiatives designed to ensure that boys and girls have access to, and positive experiences of, the same range of opportunities, behaviours, rewards and recognition. |
| genre | A group of similar or related texts which generally share characteristics relating to their structure, physical form (written, visual, print-based, televised etc.), content (the issues, story lines and people included) and beliefs (what is valued or devalued, what is represented positively/negatively and so on). Fairy tales, science-fiction novels, Year 2 maths books, hardware catalogues and political TV advertisements are all examples of genres. Texts within particular genres can challenge some generic conventions and thereby broaden the genre itself. |
| heterogeneous | Made up of parts with different characteristics. A group may be homogeneous in one way — they may all be members of a particular Year 3 classroom, and they might all live in Perth, for instance — while also being different or heterogenous in terms of their ethnicity, physical appearances and so on. |
| historical context | The time frame within which meaning is located. Some images have different meanings in different historical contexts. |
| homogenous | Made up of parts with similar characteristics. See also *heterogeneous*. |
| mythical norm | A set of characteristics that is widely represented as natural and desirable, even though these characteristics do not necessarily reflect the real diversity within a particular population. Every context produces its own norms, or standards of behaviour/appearance. Many of these are very narrow and do not reflect the real make-up of a group. |



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| naturalisation | The processes through which a particular idea becomes to appear as natural or normal. This is generally tied to patterns of repetition, or to the linking of a particular idea or concept to another idea that already has this 'natural' status. Politicians often try to sell particular policies, for instance, by linking them to such values as 'family security' because they believe that a particular version of family harmony already appears natural. |
| negative inclusion | A process whereby particular characters or behaviours are located within in a text, but are represented negatively in some way. This occurs, for instance, when a person is included but then shown to be incompetent, troublesome, stupid, troublesome, or otherwise unsuited to that environment. These characters are generally devalued against the criteria set up as normal within a particular text. |
| paradigm | A group of similar or related objects/characteristics. The paradigm of 'music types', for instance, contains such forms as classical, rock, grunge, pop, swing, opera and so on. The paradigm of 'physical appearance' could cover everything from eye colour through to hair colour, body shape, skin markings and so on. |
| paradigms of difference | Categories of similar or related characteristics grouped to recognise some common ways in which individuals are different. Commonly used paradigms of difference include gender, age, cultural background, ethnicity, sexuality, socio-economic status, physical ability, religion and physical appearance. Each paradigm contains diverse marks of difference, and the various marks of difference are often treated differently within particular contexts. Studying paradigms of difference will often lead to the identification of the ways in which particular cultural contexts produce a hierarchy of difference, with some things — such as thinness — ranked higher than others. |
| positive inclusion | A process through which an individual or behaviour is included in a particular text and shown to be valued within that text. In instances of positive inclusion, signs of difference are represented as competent, natural and normal in a particular context. |
| repetition | The regular restating or re-presentation of particular images or ideas, so that these ideas/images/values begin to appear as natural or logical or normal. Texts that link senior citizens, for instance, with images that portray them as helpless or stupid are repeated so often that the representation can come to appear as natural. |

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| signs | Small units of communication. Individual colours, sounds or smells can all be signs. All texts are made up of signs, and generally combine signs according to particular rules or conventions. The text of a Western bride, for instance, is often governed by conventions associated with weddings and femininity: a particular kind of veil/head dress goes with a particular kind of dress, which goes with a particular kind of shoes and so on. The term 'signs' is used in more particular and rigorous ways within semiotics. |
| socialisation models | Approaches that acknowledge the diverse ways in which individuals learn to associate particular values/attitudes with particular characteristics of difference. |
| status | The value attached to a particular idea, behaviour or characteristic. A high-status text, for instance, is highly valued or regarded in a particular context. |
| stereotype | A simplistic representation of a person or group which also implies a value judgement. The stereotype of the dumb blonde, for instance, not only produces a particular physical image, it also brings with it value judgements about the intelligence of this group of people. |
| stunt equity | Obvious and often widely publicised attempts to meet equity agendas that do not, in fact, challenge basic problems associated with the representation and valuing of difference. Stunt-equity programs look good on the surface, but often result in stereotyping, token inclusion or negative inclusion. |
| text | Any object of communication that can be subjected to analysis. This includes traditional artefacts such as books, magazines and movies, but also other things such as brochures, songs, classrooms, conversations, posters and so on. |
| textual environment | A collection of texts organised around a particular purpose and place. Classrooms, churches, households and so on are examples of textual environments. |
| textual production | The processes of creating and circulating various texts, ranging from our conversations through to homework sheets, posters, books and so on. |
| tokenism | An attempt at inclusion that stops short of integrating or naturalising the individual or group who has been 'added in'. |

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| traditional narratives | Texts, stories or representations that reproduce the norms associated with a particular set of characteristics or behaviours. Traditional narratives around religion, for instance, rely on stereotypes, and portray the members of particular religions as homogenous. |
| transformative narratives | See *counternarratives*. |
| transformative texts | Texts that challenge traditions associated with difference. In a transformative text, differences are included and portrayed positively. Characters associated with these differences are valued, shown to challenge stereotypes, and given central roles. Overall, transformative texts portray difference as natural, desirable and normal within a particular genre and within society more generally. |
| transformative textual analysis | An analytical framework for identifying the way various texts and contexts respond to difference. This is used as a basis for developing new patterns of dealing with difference. |
| value | Give status and respect to a particular characteristic, behaviour or person. Skills such as athleticism are often valued in schools. |
| values | A set of beliefs and attitudes that influence the way we behave. Often referred to as ideology. |
| valuing-difference models | Approaches that recognise and give special attention to the differences between groups. These approaches acknowledge the special characteristics of different groups of people, but risk representing groups as homogeneous and as essentially similar. |

As much as any society of people, Australians represent themselves as equals. Yet few Australians are able to fit the widely circulated myths about what is normal, valuable and desirable in our society. This book enables teachers and their students to challenge the multiplicity of texts that combine to tell us who we are and who we should be, and to construct new, truly inclusive, texts in their place.

Dr Leonie Rowan is a senior lecturer in Central Queensland University's Faculty of Education and Creative Arts. She has worked in the field of teacher education for the past seven years. During that time, she has focused on ways of introducing students to new ways of thinking about the 'marks of difference': age, gender, physical appearance and ability, cultural identity, sexuality, socio-economic status and religion. She is also a co-author of the recently released book *Boys, Literacies and Schooling: The Dangerous Territories of Gender-based Literacy Reform*.

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Primary English Teaching Association
PO Box 3106, Marrickville NSW 2204
Tel: (02) 9565 1277 Fax: (02) 9565 1070
Email: info@peta.edu.au
www.peta.edu.au

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